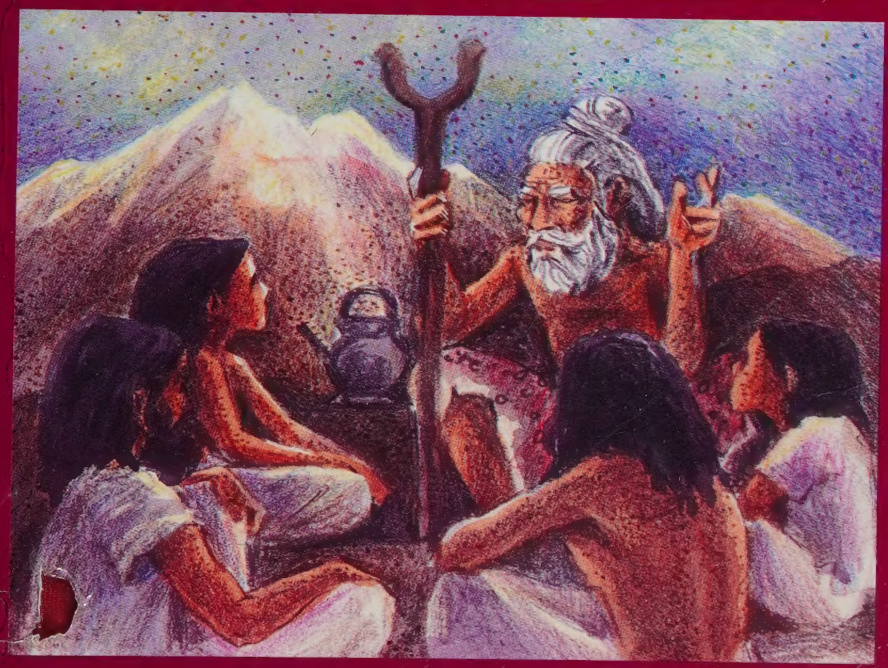
tales told by mystics

M. A. N. O. J. D. A. S.



SAHITYA AKADEMI

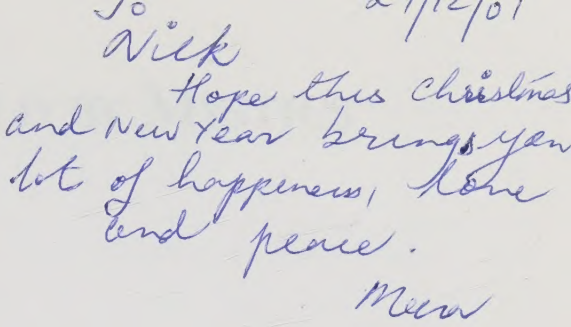
TALES TOLD BY MYSTICS: A significant branch of India's vast literary heritage consists of tales told by mystics through the ages, different from myths and legends. Though taken for granted as a part of our folklore and rarely discussed, their influence on the minds of generations of common people has been only next to that of the epics. Sometimes they hit the nail on the head, sometimes they shock and sometimes they make one laugh at oneself, but they invariably enrich one's mind by identifying the complex and intriguing forces – psychological and occult, at work in our lives.

This collection, probably the first ever of its kind, of a full hundred tales culled from sages known and unknown, through decades of a sustained interest by its present author, should prove as revealing as they have proved for centuries past.

Rs. 180

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/talestoldbymysti0000dasm



TALES TOLD BY MYSTICS

TALES TOLD BY MYSTICS

MANOJ DAS

Illustrated by
Neeta Gangopadhyay

SAHITYA AKADEMI

Tales Told by Mystics is a collection of mystic tales retold by Manoj Das.
Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. 2001

Sahitya Akademi
Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110 001

Sales : 'Swati' , Mandir Marg,
New Delhi-110 001

Regional Offices
Jeevan Tara Building, 4th Floor, 23A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road,
Calcutta-700 053

Central College Campus, University Library Building,
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Veedhi, Bangalore-560 001

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar,
Mumbai-400 014

Chennai Office
C.I.T. Campus, T.T.T.I. Post Tharamani, Chennai-600 113

© Sahitya Akademi
First published 2001

Cover : Neeta Gangopadhyay

ISBN : 81-260-1175-0

Rupees One Hundred Eighty

Typeset at Sita Fine Arts Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi and printed at
Sita Composers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

Contents

Preface/ix
Four Travellers and a Stranger/1
The Song at Dawn/4
Two Ways to Learn a Hymn/7
The Last Brahmin/10
God in Smiles and in Tears/14
Riddle of the Brahman/16
Hair-oil for the Bald/19
Deeds and Destiny/22
The Dangerous Rider/26
Crossing the River/30
The Miraculous Contact/34
The Strange Case of a Blanket/39
The Forgotten Vow/42
Crazy in the Wilderness/45
The Seeker of Happiness/49
The Bare-Handed Baba/52
An Experiment with a Cup of Oil/56
The Ochre Garb/60
Brahma Face to Face with the Brahma/62
The Miracle that Failed/65

The Serpent's Predicament/67
A Project of Prolonged Thought!/70
Of Action and Consciousness/73
Of the Nose behind the Nose-Ring/75
A Suernatural Achievement/77
The Propitious Hour/80
Who has Renounced Wealth and Happiness?/82
Feats Human and Otherwise/84
The Ascetic and the Angler/86
The True Miracle/88
Mysteries Human and Divine/90
The Scholar Remembers His Native Dialect/93
The Swan from Manasarovar/96
The Mighty Elephant and the Tiny Fish/98
The Final Choice/100
The Jackal's Magic/103
In Search of Fire/106
A Most Delicious Drink/108
How Long to Wait?/110
The Indefatigable Bondage/113
From Whom to Beg?/117
A Fight against Fate/121
"Come Back Properly Dressed!"/126
Myself/130
The Sadhu Who Saved a Village/132
In Quest of the Beautiful/135
How to Lead Home A Cow/137
The Changing Taste/139
Of Truth and Lie/141

Trying to Know the Elephant/143
The Hand that Thrashed is the Hand that Nursed/145
Three Boons/147
The Man who went Forward/150
Indra to Blame!/153
Signs of the Ascetic/156
Far Beyond the Masks/159
The Untouchable/162
Curse or Blessing?/164
The Man Atop the Hill, the Man Midway the Hill and the Climbers/167
A Speculation that Became a Prophecy/170
A Gift for the Queen/173
Why the Sage Kept Silent/176
Ganja Sanctioned!/180
The Guru and the Disciple/182
Enlightened Overnight/186
Handling the Wishing Cup/189
A Windfall of Luck/192
The Fasting Devotees/197
The Location of Paradise/200
Gold for Happiness/203
The Transformed Soil/207
The Sinner/210
A Revelation for the Thief/214
While God Waits/217
When the White Lotus was Red/220
Back from Pilgrimage/223
Under the Wish-fulfilling Tree/225

Roy Sahib Turns Non-violent/228
The Flattered Donkey/231
The Wholly Holyman/234
Wisdom Through Charity/238
Wanted a Scholar—Old and Bald/241
A Strange Ware for Sale/246
Secret of the Poet's Sight/249
The Ultimate Boon/253
The Locked Gate/258
A Companion in the Wilderness/261
That Explains!/265
The Friendly Mirror/268
The Word/270
When Cleverness Turned into Wisdom/272
The Day the Earth Turned Gold/275
The Three Candidates/279
Erudition in Midstream/282
The Invisible Blow/284
Garuda's Compassion/287
The Last Lock of Hair/290
The Miracle Yet to Happen/293
The Magic Stone/295
The Misunderstood Prayer/297

PREFACE

The India of yore, evidently, was an astoundingly fertile ground for the growth of several genres of fiction. Parallel to the chronologial development of its mythology (The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Itihasa or the epics and the Puranas), there grew a solid ethical, moral pragmatic and purely earthly tradition of literature consisting of the *Brihatkatha* (only a part of which is available to us as the *Kathasarit-sagara),* a compilation of lively tales of wisdom, wit and delight; the *Jatakas,* the world's first collection of didactic tales; the *Panchatantra,* the world's first compilation of fables, apart from stories based on dramatic events and characters of a remote past, like those of Savitri and Satyavan, Dushyanta and Shakuntala, Nala and Damayanti, King Harishchandra, etc. some of which were incorporated in the *Mahabharata* and came to be regarded as aspects of our mythological lore.

But independent of all these branches grew yet another branch of tales told by mystics through the ages, rich in psychological insight and profound for their revelations of the mysteries of Truth and Consciousness, and for shedding light on various perplexing issues we encounter in life. They were narrated by sages, gurus and other mystics, in order to drive home a point, to elucidate a philosophical proposition or to simply enlighten the seekers on the demands of life spiritual. Most of these stories had a wonderful plasticity about them. A story might have been told by five teachers, but each teacher told it in his own way—a way often determined by the peculiar need of his audience—yet the theme of the story remained unerringly effective.

Such stories have prevailed as an oral tradition, though some biographers of such Masters have recorded them, as Sri Ramakrishna's anecdotes are found in the monumental work, *Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita,* by 'M'.

The Vedic and the original Vedantic tradition permitted no dichotomy between the life mundane and the life Divine. Though immersed in *Avidya,* ignorance, the human life struggled to grow towards the light of true Knowledge and Truth. The world and the society, with all their problems, were not false or illusory; the problems, in fact, were challenges, expecting the seeker to delve into them in order to discover the truth they hide. Viewed properly and with humility, understood keeping in mind the ultimate goal of one's life, every situation could contribute to the process of one's inner growth.

However, at a certain phase of India's social development, several schools of mysticism grew contemptuous of the world and declared the so-called worldly life as anathema to the life spiritual. It was unfortunate, but not surprising. Those who received a touch of the spiritual bliss, the pleasures the world offered appeared to them ridiculously poor. They chose to reject the latter, without suspecting that such pleasures could be distortions of a value genuine and that spiritual consciousness of a sublime order could restore such distortions to their original glory which they had forfeited under Nature's tyranny.

We find, that is why, a strong presence of the element of an ascetic denial of life in so many tales the mystics told. We should view them as a revolt against the common man's extreme preoccupation with the gross, crude and selfish physical life. The impatient mystic would like to give him a jolt to wake him up to the other and greater reality—the Divine—though unfortunately in his zeal to do so the mystic generally highlighted only one aspect of the Divine—the aspect of the static, pure bliss, and forgot that the world too is nothing but the Divine in the process of unfolding Himself.

This is what should be the attitude of a true mystic: "The difficulty of harmonising the divine life with human living, of being in God and yet living in man is the very difficulty that he is set here to solve and not to shun. He has learned that the joy, the peace and the deliverance are an imperfect crown and no real possession if they do not form a state secure in itself, inalienable to the soul, not dependent on aloofness and inaction but firm in the storm and the race and the battle, unsullied whether by the joy of the world or by its suffering. The ecstasy of the divine embrace will not abandon him because he obeys the impulse of divine love for God in humanity; .... If there is an opposition between the spiritual life and that of the world, it is that gulf which he is here to bridge, that opposition which he is here to change into a harmony. If the world is ruled by the flesh and the devil, all the more reason that the children of Immortality should be here to conquer it for God and the Spirit." (Sri Aurobindo. *The Synthesis of Yoga*)

I must hasten to add that even stories with a strong ascetic orientation were designed not so much to inspire disgust for the mundane world as to warn man against attachment to false values, greed, lust, etc., and his readiness to use even occult powers for satisfaction of blind desires.

But satire against stupidity (the first sign of stupidity is, it never suspects itself—says a mystic), inhumanity, and exhtortations to broaden the consciousness assume an equally great importance in many such tales and several of them reveal subtle mysteries of the spiritual world.

Most of the tales retold in this volume circulate orally. The popular ones among them have been retold by different mystics in their own ways. Some stories can be traced to ancient works like the Puranas — and some to the *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritsagara*. All the tales told by mystics are folktales — but only in a special sense. I have scrupulously steered clear of both the traditional folktales and the mythological tales, though a sprinkle of mythology—an

occasional appearance of characters like Narada or Garuda could not have been avoided. I have come across plots of at least two of these stories circulating as ordinary folktales, naturally minus their didactic elements.

I was initiated to this genre of stories, when a child, by my mother, who in her childhood had gathered them from pilgrims and mendicants for whom her parental house was an ever-open shelter. Over the past four decades, I have continued to collect them from numerous sources—individual narrators and whatever records are available of tales told by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Nigamananda, Sri Vijaykrishna Goswami, Swami Ramdas, Swami Ram Tirth, Yogiji Maharaj and others. One story is from Swami Brahmananda who lived at Chandod on the river Narmada—as communicated to me by my friend, Shri Champak Chatterjee, administrator and writer.

Some of these stories (like the four blind men debating on the shape of an elephant, or the story of the man who chanced upon the wishfulfilling tree) are so widely known that I had reservations about including them in this volume. But, without them, the collection would lack its representative character. Hence they too are there.

I am entirely responsible for the way I have narrated them—for the aspects of the stories which I have emphasised, for they are the aspects which have impressed me. To the best of my conviction, the theme and the spirit of the stories have been faithfully projected.

The brief comments at the end of most of the stories may appear superfluous to some readers. In the eighties of the 20th century I serialised a number of these stories in *The Indian & Foreign Review,* a journal published by the Government of India mostly for circulation abroad. Brief notes stressing the significance of the stories were appreciated not only by foreign readers but also by Indians. Hence, except where a message is absolutely obvious, comments have

been appended to the stories. I expect that there will be readers who will discover in the stories messages subtler than those hinted at by me.

I bow to the great Masters, the original tellers of these stories, in gratitude.

It is in fitness of things that these stories, a treasure of our national heritage, should be published by our National Academy of Letters. I am most thankful to the Sahitya Akademi.

Manoj Das

Four Travellers and a Stranger

The bushy banyan tree by the side of the long road at the foot of the hill gave cool shade to a ruminating cow, a tired dog and an old, bearded man who sat leaning against its trunk, his legs sprawled and his eyes shut.

It was a spot on the frontier between two kingdoms.

A traveller who was crossing the border stopped for a while as his eyes fell on the old man.

"Well, well, your disguise can possibly deceive some detectives, but not all. The other day I too dressed like you and, having done my day's job rather well, was returning home, evading the vigilant eyes of three patrolling guards, but the fourth one caught hold of me and searched my person and recovered the gold chain I had snatched from a lady. The day's only gain was gone, but the pity is, the effect of the blows I received on my back still refuses to go! However, try your luck, Brother!"

The man spoke in a faint soliloquy and moved away.

Next, there appeared a rider. He pulled the reins of his horse.

"Who can say if this man was not waiting to enter our state with the same motive with which I am about to enter the neighbouring state?" he asked himself and said further, "Let it be so, but I have no time to lose. The success of a spy's mission depends on being at the right place at the right time. I must hurry!"

He galloped away.

An hour later a passer-by, tottering and staggering, stopped for a while and laughed looking at the bearded stranger.

"How much did you gulp down, my chum, that you should lie sprawled like this? Look at me. I've guzzled a full pot! Even then I'm as smart as a bridegroom! No doubt, my head at times flies away, but only to return and take root once again in no time. Here it is, already back at its place and sitting quiet like a good boy!" the fellow muttered, touching his own head with his hands, sure that the precious stuff was there.

Casting yet another contemptuous look at the old man, the drunkard moved away.

By and by twilight set in and all became quiet.

A young man, walking and humming stopped at the sight of the old man. He observed the stranger for a moment. He then slowly went closer to him and sat down at his feet.

"My good luck! Whom do I see!" he told himself in a murmur. He fanned the old man with a large leaf and drove away flies and ants from his body.

His trance over, the old hermit opened his eyes at last and smiled.

"O great soul, I will be most grateful if you accept my hospitality for the night. My house is nearby," the young man said, prostrating himself before the old man.

"Let it be so, my son, if that is God's will," said the old man and he followed his would-be host.

One often projects one's own state of mind or quality of consciousness on an object and judges it accordingly. In the old man lying against the tree, the thief suspects a thief, the spy suspects a spy and the drunkard sees another drunkard. But the fourth traveller, endowed with a mystic insight, finds in him a Yogi who was in a state of trance. He alone knew the truth because his vision was not deceived by appearances.

The Song at Dawn

Seth Kamaldas was convalescing in the upper floor of a costly guest-house built amidst a grove, overlooked by a hill. A cool spring was beside it and around it were acres of green field. Proper diet and medicine had helped him to recover fast, but the greatest help in that direction had come from a source for which he was not required to spend any money. It was the song he heard at dawn, day after day.

A cobbler who during the working hours stationed himself on a pavement in the bazar, a mile away, took shelter in a corner of the sprawling verandah of the guest-house at night. The watchman let him do so. For he knew the cobbler to be a very good man.

At down the Seths' sleep slowly terminated at the sound of the Cobbler's song. He would set up and listen to the song with concentration. Like a miraculous elixir it worked even on his body, what to speak of its effect on his mind. He felt thankful to the singer.

The Seth was still unable to walk, though at the time of listening to the song he had a feeling that he could even run if he so desired!

One day he asked the watchman to send the cobbler to him. It was night when, after a day's work, the cobbler came to see him.

"You charm me with your singing. It is so invigorating! I'm immensely benefited by it. Here is a small reward for you," said the Seth, handing over a bag to the poor man. It contained a thousand silver coins.

The cobbler stood overwhelmed. With tears in his eyes, he said, "Sir, I could not have imagined that my singing would mean anything to anybody! When the dawn breaks out upon the hill, I feel inspired to sing one of the few devotional songs

I had learnt in my childhood from a neighbour in my distant village." He wiped his eyes and bowed to the Seth and went away.

The next dawn brought to the Seth's ears the sweetest music he had ever heard while he was not fully awake. "The singer is in ecstasy today," he told himself and, as though under a spell, got down and descended the stairs. He did not know when he had walked to the corner of the verandah on the ground floor where the cobbler sat. Meanwhile the singing had stopped. It was still dusky.

The Seth was about to ask why he stopped singing when the cobbler stood up, bowed to him and hastened to say, "Sir, please pardon me, but take your kind reward back."

"Why?" asked the surprised Seth.

"Sir, the only time this ignorant creature thought of God and sang in his praise was at dawn. That was the greatest joy for me. But, as soon as I woke up today, I began to worry. Where to keep so much money? How best to use it? So on and so forth. I forgot to sing today. In fact, I grew conscious of my lapse only when I saw you approaching," said the cobbler.

"Do you mean to say that you did not sing today?"

"I did not sing today and I wonder if I will be able to sing tomorrow, unless you are merciful to me," said the cobbler, placing the money bag at the Seth's feet. He then almost ran away.

Back in his room the Seth could not check his tears.

Whose singing did he hear while still half asleep? Whose voice did enable him to walk unconsciously, after so many days?

✠ ✠ Grace can work through any agency. For the Seth, the cobbler was the channel. But the story also has other lessons to impart. For example, while the donation the Seth made out signified the expansion of his own heart, its rejection by the cobbler pointed at the truth that there are experiences and inspirations which cannot be defined or measured by grosser means. ✠ ✠

Two Ways to Learn a Hymn

"My lord, I pray for leave for a period of six months," said the minister.

"Leading your family to some distant place for a long holiday, are you?" asked the king.

"No, my lord."

"Then? Going on a pilgrimage?"

"My lord, I propose to be at a holy place, no doubt, and reside in the hermitage of a great sage, but not for the sake of pilgrimage."

"Then?"

"To learn a certain mantra and to practise it, my lord."

"Do you propose to get the entire Rig Veda by heart? Why do you need such a long time for learning a single mantra?" demanded the king. "You are endowed with an excellent memory!"

"My lord, the mantra I propose to learn is short, but great is its significance," said the minister.

"What is it about?"

"It is known as the Gayatri, an invocation to the Sun-god."

"We'll decide about your request tomorrow," said the king.

The minister could notice a twinkle of triumph in the eyes of the king when he saw him the next day in the royal garden.

The strolling king stopped and smiled and even before the minister had the time to greet him, began to recite the hymn, Gayatri.

"Well, my dear minister," he said with a chuckle, "our priest wrote it down for us and it took us but a few minutes to remember it. What on earth made you think that you must need six months to learn this much? You surely were not kidding!"

"Pardon me my lord, but you have not learnt the hymn," calmly said the minister.

"Did I miss any word? Was my pronunciation defective?" asked an embarrassed king.

"No, my lord, neither you missed any word nor your pronunciation was defective. But you have not learnt the hymn."

The king recited the hymn once again and asked in a stern voice, "Are you now convinced that indeed I have learnt the hymn?"

"I'm sorry, my lord, but you have not learnt the hymn!"

"Have you gone crazy?"

"I hope not, my lord!"

"Do you wish to drive me crazy?"

"That is far from my intention, my lord!"

"Then prove that I have not learnt the hymn. Call any scholar of your choice and I'm prepared to recite it again," proposed the king.

"My lord, I'll try to prove that you have not learnt the hymn without calling any scholar. But my word or action is bound to appear audacious and you must bear with it."

"Prove by whatever means you can," said the king impatiently.

The minister looked around. Two gardeners were watering the plants. He called out to them and they came running.

"Will you fetch a string of rope?" ordered the minister.

One of the gardeners brought the stuff.

"Good. Now tie the king to the tree yonder," ordered the minister.

The gardeners could not believe their ears. They stood gaping.

"I say, tie the king to the tree!" the minister repeated his order.

By then the king was sure that the minister had lost his sanity. He looked at the gardeners. "Tie the minister to the tree!" he ordered.

At once the gardeners proceeded to execute the order. The minister offered no resistance. He smiled looking at the king. After he had been tied, he asked, "My lord, did you understand the meaning of this small drama?"

"What did you expect me to understand?"

"Both you and I uttered the same words, passed the same order and to the same servants. But my words produced no effect. Your words proved effective immediately!"

"So?" the king asked, even though he had begun to grasp the meaning of the minister's statement.

"My lord, your words had authority behind them, my words had none! The same truth is applicable to the hymns. It is not enough to be able to recite them. One must master the power behind them and earn the right to chant them so that they are effective. That requires some discipline, some dedicated practice. Only then the hymns can become meaningful," explained the minister.

The king understood and apologised to the minister and embraced him while untying him himself.

⊠⊠ Mantras are living powers. But a mechanical recitation of them or mere academic knowledge of them does not yield the result for which they were formed. *Mantrasiddhi* or the realization of the hymn [of the power inherent in it] is quite different from a knowledge of the hymn. ⊠⊠

The Last Brahmin

Hundreds of years ago there was a small village comprising a dozen Brahmin families on the bank of the river Daya.

They were a pious lot. They performed their rituals in great earnestness. In the courtyard of every household was a tiny holy place, *yajnakund,* marked for the sacred fire-rite.

One morning while cleaning his *yajnakund,* a Brahmin found a dazzling object amidst the ashes. He picked it up, examined it and was sure that it was gold.

Surprised, he looked all around the spot and upward too. There was no clue to explain a piece of gold appearing in the *kund.*

That meant, the gold had materialised there. What could have caused the phenomenon? He conducted a thorough investigation. The only person to live in his house was his wife. With great patience he examined her and learnt that a bull had entered his house when the lady was busy sweeping the courtyard while chewing a *pan,* a betel-leaf, and since it was imperative for her to shout at the intruder which could be possible only if she had been relieved of her mouthful of red saliva, she had spat it out into the *kund*!"

"Stupid woman! How dared you commit such a sacrilege?" exclaimed the Brahmin while rubbing the piece of gold which was growing brighter.

The lady only laughed, looking at the gold in her husband's palm.

"We ought to throw this dangerous object—outcome of your sinful act—away!" said the Brahmin.

"Let me see how dangerous it is! And if throw it you must, why don't you throw it at me?" said the lady snatching the thing from her husband.

"You greedy, you sinner, throw it away I say!" shouted the Brahmin. But he began coughing and his voice lost much of its verve.

"Don't yell! Am I going to worship it?" commented the lady and throwing yet another betel-leaf into her mouth, walked away.

Next day the Brahmin remained extremely alert while cleaning the *kund*—and not unexpectedly, found yet another tiny chunk of gold.

"You ignorant woman! How dared you repeat your bizarre performance!" he shouted.

The lady came out, all smiles, and snatched the object at great speed. She wore a silk saree. "I've ordered a pair of silk *dhotis* for you, my poor husband!"

Once again a piece of gold appeared the next day and again the day after. The Brahmin got accustomed to the miracle. However, he was too conscientious to forget to chide his dear wife and he did so quite religiously.

His dilapidated hut gave way to a fine building. He owned a large number of cows and employed servants to care for his property.

"My dear sister, my charming, pious, chastity-incarnate sister, my joy at your prosperity knows no bound. Your rapid luck makes me feel equally lucky. I must tell you that ever since your husband coated his teeth with glittering gold, not only his recitation of the hymns but also his shrieks at his servants have assumed a mystic accent. And, sister, how pretty these ornaments sit on your limbs! Where is the Maharani who can excel you in doing justice to jewellery!" a young lady of the neighbourhood remarked to the Brahmin's wife.

"Ha ha! and where is the Maharani endowed with the kind of merit I have earned? I spit and there grows gold!" said the Brahmin's wife.

"Great! How much I wish you spit on my palms so that I got a piece of gold!" said the young lady, and by and by obliged the older one to give out the secret of the phenomenon to her.

A week later the young lady of the neighbourhood too was seen bedocked with a silk saree and a gold necklace. And, before long, the whole village had a new look. The secret had spread from woman to woman. Gold emerged in every household.

There was only one exception. The old Vachaspati, the village teacher, remained as poor as ever.

Time and again his wife would implore him to let her spit in the *kund,* but only to be snubbed. "My dear wife, I simply cannot destroy my *Swadharma,* I cannot!" was Vachaspati's response.

"Very well, if you will not let us grow affluent like the others, at least let us leave the village and go over to our daughter's place—that serene hamlet near the forest!" the lady appealed to Vachaspati.

"Please do not nurture such idea. That will be catastrophic!" Vachaspati said.

At last, one day, the old lady lost all patience and packed up her few things. "You may tarry here. I cannot continue to live a wretched, miserable life amidst such pomp and show. I go!"

Vachaspati was left with no alternative but to follow his wife.

Remorsefully they walked. It was evening and they were on a meadow outside the village when some disturbing noises were heard behind. Surprised, they looked back. Their village was going up in flames, the villagers setting fire to one another's house and quarrelling ferociously and fighting.

"This is the catastrophy I anticipated. Wealth earned without toil and at the price of sinful actions bred mutual hatred, jealousy and violence. Order prevailed as long as we—the solitary household—continued to be free from the vice and our *yajnakund* remained unspoilt. But with our departure, the village lost all its right to peace," said Vachaspati, wiping his tears.

But they resumed their walk.

⊠ ⊠ The story is an illustration of greed and vanity corroding piety on one hand and the belief that in a community even one man's righteousness can be a protection, unknown to others, for all. ⊠ ⊠

God in Smiles and in Tears

Princess Meerabai had two maternal aunts. Both were married to wealthy landlords.

Once the princess, then a little girl, paid a visit to her younger aunt's house. The aunt and her husband received the child with affection and Meerabai was delighted to see that her aunt was never tired of helping the poor and the needy. Even if the lady's eyes fell on a traveller who looked tired, she would send her servant to enquire of him if he needed some food and rest.

She built a spacious rest house for the pilgrims who visited the local temple and dug a lake near a forest to quench the thirst of the animals which suffered in summer when the pools around the area dried up.

In all such activities of hers, she had the ready support of her husband. He was ever ready to untie the strings of his purse at his wife's asking.

"My child, how lucky am I to have got such a husband! His generosity and kindness always remind me of God, who alone could have inspired such qualities in his heart," the aunt confided to the little princess the day the latter took leave of her. "Indeed I'm grateful to God!" she concluded.

Next, the princess visited her elder aunt. There too she was received with warmth, but before long she was sad to find out that her aunt's husband was not only a miser but also an unkind man. He was rude to his wife even if the lady fed a

dying man or passed on a worn-out blanket to a pilgrim shivering with cold. Meerabai suffered with her silently suffering aunt.

At last came the day when Meerabai must leave for her parents' house.

"My child, how lucky am I to have got such a husband!" The aunt whispered to Meerabai giving her a farewell kiss. "I am obliged to pray to God every now and then on account of my husband's unkindness! Where else could I find solace? Who else would understand me? Indeed, I'm grateful to God for giving me a husband for whom He becomes my only refuge!"

Meerabai's eyes were moist. But she had learnt a great lesson.

⊠⊠ No external circumstance can be a hindrance to a person with a mystic bent of mind. When one remembered one's ultimate goal in life and proceeded towards it with a strong faith, everything that happened to him or her, every kind of situation in which one found oneself, could be beneficent. In another version of the story the two main characters are two illustrious saints, one with a compassionate consort and the other having a nagging, quarrelsome one. ⊠⊠

Riddle of the Brahman

Saran was considered a dull boy. His father, Vrindaban, one day led him to the Sanskrit school where all the Brahmin boys of the village learnt the lessons which would make them eligible to earn their living as priests, and greeted the teacher.

"Pundit-ji," he said, imploringly, "Just allow this unlucky chap to sit behind the last row of your pupils. I know, he will learn nothing, but at least he will be in an atmosphere presided over by Goddess Saraswati. That may do him good. And Pundit-ji, kind and compassionate that you are, maybe once in a while you'll be pleased to throw a morsel or crumb of knowledge at him. The chap will be lucky if he can retain it."

The teacher loved Vrindaban. He agreed to tolerate the blockhead's presence in the classroom.

Saran would present himself at the school most regularly, before any other boy had arrived, sweep the room, dust the teacher's wooden seat and sit down in a corner of the room. With great attention he would listen to everything the teacher had to say but, of course, nobody expected him to make any progress!

One day, bowing to the teacher, he said, "Sir, what about a morsel or a crumb of knowledge to be thrown at me? When do I get it?"

"You can get it right now!" said the teacher. "Here it is: *Aham Brahmosmi* (I am Brahma). Recite it audibly or silently. Go on doing so." The phrase was uppermost in the teacher's

mind because he had explained its import in the class that very day.

With determination, Saran learnt the phrase. The teacher did not feel any necessity to explain its meaning to him.

"Aham Brahmosmi!" Saran went on reciting at home, with gusto.

"Do you know the meaning of the phrase, my boy?" Vrindaban, his father, asked him.

"Meaning?" Saran looked, his eyes bulging. That the phrase could have a meaning is something that had not struck him.

"Well, my son, the phrase means I am Brahman. Will you remember this?"

"I will," answered Saran quite enthusiastically.

The next day Saran happened to visit his maternal uncle's house in the neighbouring village. He started reciting the

only lesson he had learnt: *"Aham Brahmosmi* —which means Father is Brahman!"

"No, no, my dear boy, the phrase means I am Brahman!" his maternal uncle corrected him.

Saran looked at him agape, but did not say anything.

On his way back to his home, he recited: *"Aham Brahmosmi*—means Uncle is Brahman!"

The village chief who happened to pass by, heard him. "Saran, the phrase means I am Brahman, not Uncle!"

Saran had never felt so surprised in life. How can a single phrase mean so many things—the Uncle is Brahman, Father is Brahman and the village chief too is Brahman?"

He felt giddy and sat down on a slab of stone and began reciting the phrase in the spirit of asking the phrase itself what it really meant.

The sun went down; dusk gave way to darkness; the stars began to shine. Saran went on reciting *Aham Brahmosmi* in order to find out its real meaning.

The night passed and at dawn the knowledge also dawned in him that he was himself Brahman—just as everybody else—the Pundit, Father, the village chief included—all were Brahman. In fact not only everyone, but everything was Brahman.

Saran became a realised soul.

The story hints at two things. Our judgement of an individual has no value from a spiritual point of view. Saran might have appeared to be dull on the surface. But a faculty in him was obviously awake and ready for progress.

Secondly, spiritual awakening can come to one through any channel of his being. Indeed, even the deficiency in one's understanding can become the channel for one's true understanding!

Hair-oil for the Bald

Mahim was young, handsome and intelligent. He was also interested in matters spiritual. Everybody in the village loved him. He possessed a crop of lovely hair and he was very proud of it.

Once a Sadhu camped in his village. Learned and lovable that he was, people flocked to him, eager to hear his wisdom or to receive his blessings.

Mahim respected him very much and the Sadhu also took a liking for the young man.

One day the Sadhu got ready to depart.

"Sadhuji, what is your destination?" asked Mahim.

"My only destination is God. However, at the physical plane, the holy Himalayas. As you know, I have my Ashram there and my disciples must be missing me," replied the Sadhu.

"Will you let me accompany you?" asked Mahim.

"Gladly," said the Sadhu. He then confided to Mahim that the latter, indeed, had the making of a Yogi.

"I never advise anyone to take to a spiritual life unless I am sure of his *Swadharma,* the inner law of one's growth. So far as you are concerned, to follow the path spiritual is your *Swadharma,"* said the Sadhu.

"Thank you, Sir, but I will need at least a month to prepare myself for taking such a radical course in life. I am acting as the hero in an opera which is to be staged next week. I cannot break away, leaving in the lurch all the others involved," said Mahim.

"I'll wait," said the Sadhu without any hesitation. "Your soul is much more important than my early departure."

Mahim thanked him and for the next few days, remained engrossed in the rehearsal.

At last the drama was presented and Mahim acted so well that the very next evening he received a letter from the landlord's beautiful daughter, professing her love for him.

Mahim was excited. He grew keen to marry her. Even the landlord had no objection to it. But the problem arose when it was found out that Mahim's father had made a solemn promise to the village moneylender to marry Mahim to his daughter. What was significant, the moneylender's daughter too wrote a love-letter to Mahim!

After some dispute, arguments and negotiations, it was decided that Mahim could marry both the girls!

"Baba! I think I am destined to lead the life of a householder for sometime. But be sure, I'll be with you at a later stage!" Mahim told the Sadhu, his head hung. "To be frank, I find it difficult to disregard the love of two young ladies," he added.

The Sadhu gave out a guffaw. "They love you, do they?" he asked as if to himself.

"Of course they do!" answered Mahim.

The Sadhu sighed. "As you please," he said. "But what good is hair-oil for the bald!"

"Bald, you say, Sir?" Mahim asked, rather shocked. His hand went to his head and he felt his luxuriant hair.

The Sadhu departed. Mahim was married to both the brides. Soon his life grew miserable as both his wives frequently quarrelled with each other and with him.

Years passed. Mahim was a middle-aged man. Between his two wives, the moneylender's daughter was older than the landlord's daughter. The elder wife's hair began greying along with Mahim's but the younger wife's hair was raven-black.

Once Mahim fell ill. His condition grew critical. But he recovered and lay convalescing for six months.

During that period one of his wives was always by his side, while he lay in a state of daze.

At last he was able to sit up, stand up and walk. The day he took bath all by himself, he felt fresh and looked into the mirror to see his face after a long time.

He almost fainted. He had grown totally bald ! He wept bitterly and by and by found out that while attending upon him, the younger wife would pluck all his grey hair so that he would look younger himself, and the older wife would pluck all his black hair so that he should not look younger than herself.

None of them really loved him; they loved only themselves. Mahim understood the meaning of the Sadhu's guffaw as well as that of his intriguing comment. It was too late for him to go on a spiritual quest as his illness had stripped him of his strength and energy.

There is a perpetual tug-of-war between the spell *Prakriti* or Nature casts on man and his inner aspiration for transcending it. The ominous warning the story gives is, even after one has heard one's psychic call, one can still be entrapped.

We cannot say that the Sadhu had foreseen the physical baldness of our hero. He used it figuratively, indicating that there is a time for everything and once a propitious moment passes, a great opportunity is lost.

Deeds and Destiny

In the forest on the outskirts of the city lived a hermit who was credited with an uncanny genius for predicting events. People flocked to him to know their future, heedless of the fact that the hermit was never very happy with their curiosity.

The hermit continued shifting his camp into more and more deep and distant parts of the forest until people grew tired of looking for him and gave up their search.

One day two friends, Vipul and Vijan, lost their way while making a short-cut through the forest on their way to another town. They roamed about till it grew dark. They were afraid and they desperately looked for a shelter.

After some wandering they saw a beam of light behind a thicket. They approached the spot with trepidations of heart and soon reached a cottage—near a murmuring brook, in an atmosphere filled with the fragrance of sandalwood and Tulsi leaves.

They peeped into the cottage and saw an old man lost in trance. They guessed that he was the hermit reputed for accurate predictions.

Fear left them in the hermit's presence. They lay in prostration on the floor and when the hermit opened his eyes, they sat up, their hands folded.

The hermit heard their story and served them with fruits. "Relax. When it is morning, take a bath in the brook. Some of my disciples should be here after the sunrise. I will ask one of them to show you the way out of the forest," said the compassionate hermit.

They did as advised, but when it was time for them to depart, they stood before him in a gesture of supplication and said, "Sir, we know about your wonderful capacity to predict people's future. We will be fools if we leave your presence without knowing our future, now that chance has brought us face to face with you!"

"Look here, boys, I am not at all fond of making predictions. It may not be good for you to know your future. Besides, your future as it stands now, may not remain unchanged!" said the hermit.

But the young men would not budge unless the hermit satisfied their desire.

"All right," said the hermit. "Sit quiet for a moment."

Vipul and Vijan sat cross-legged before him and the hermit meditated on them. Then, looking at Vipul, he said with the firm voice of one who knows: "You should become a king in a year's time." Then, his gaze fixed on Vijan, he said, "Sorry, boy, but you are destined to die in the hands of an assassin in a year's time!"

The two friends bowed to him and took leave of him.

Once outside the forest, Vipul could not contain his joy. He danced like one possessed. But Vijan grew gloomy. That was only natural.

Back home, Vipul behaved proudly and arrogantly. "I will behead you when I become a king!" was the refrain in his speech whenever he got annoyed with anybody including his kinsmen. People who heard from Vijan—who was known for his truthfulness—that the hermit had predicted of Vipul becoming a king, were afraid of retorting him. Before him they conducted themselves with awe and a false show of reverence.

Vijan, who was a teacher, did his work with great dedication and spent the rest of his time in prayer. When he was not praying, he was serving the people around him. He was humble to all. Slowly he came out of his gloom. No

longer did the fear of death loom larger before him. He had surrendered himself to the Lord.

Eleven months passed. One evening Vipul called Vijan and said, "Dear friend, I am out to select a site for my future palace. Wouldn't you help me with the selection? Only a month more is left for my being crowned a king, you know!"

Vijan accompanied Vipul. Both were surveying a large meadow when Vipul stumbled upon a half-buried pot. He dug it out and removed its lid and saw that it contained gold. "Hurrah!" he shouted, "My luck has just begun to bloom! Now I must use this money in preparing to receive the crown that is coming to me."

He had hardly finished with his exclamation when a bandit jumped out of a bush and tried to snatch the pot off his hand. When Vijan came to his friend's rescue, the bandit attacked him with a dagger. But Vijan was stronger than the bandit and he also knew the tricks of self-defence. He gave a lightning punch to the fellow. The dagger fell off his hand, though Vijan received a cut on his shoulder. The bandit fled.

The grateful Vipul offered Vijan half of the wealth the pot contained. But Vijan politely refused the offer, saying that since he shall die shortly, he had no need for gold.

Vipul spent the wealth whimsically, eating, drinking and making merry in many a dubious way.

A full year passed. There was no sign of a crown descending on Vipul's head nor of death coming anywhere nearer Vijan.

They waited for some more days. Vipul was growing impatient. He obliged Vijan to accompany him in search of the hermit who, meanwhile, had retreated farther into the forest.

"Sir, how did your predictions prove wrong?" they asked him, when they traced him after a long search.

The hermit, no less surprised, sat in meditation. Then he told Vipul, "Your destiny changed because of your stupid

actions over the months. The crown that would have come to you was reduced to a potful of gold which you found in the field."

Turning to Vijan, he said , "Your prayers, humility and trust in the Divine changed your destiny too. Death in the assassin's hand was reduced to your getting merely wounded by him."

The two friends returned silently.

⊠⊠ Karma is a highly complex concept. If things for which we have not bargained must happen to us as a consequence of a certain kind of actions or thoughts of earlier days [or even earlier lives], cannot actions or thoughts of a different kind affect or alter such consequences? The story throws light on this question, though it does not propose to give an answer to the complete riddle of Karma. Sufferings and joys are not exclusively consequences of bad or good acts; they are experiences necessary for one's psychic growth. But that is a different question. ⊠⊠

The Dangerous Rider

It was a hot noon. But Ram and Paramanand did not care. They walked on, engrossed in a lively conversation.

They were now near the river. On the other side of it was the village, their destination. They must deliver their guru's message to the headman of the village and should be back in the Ashram by evening.

"We can cross the river without much difficulty. Only day before yesterday I plodded through it, the water level touching my chest, no higher than that," said Paramanand.

"Brothers, is it not possible to find a ferry?" an anxious voice put the question to them. They saw a young lady waiting under the banyan tree on the bank.

"No ferry is to be found within a distance of five miles," said Paramanand.

"O God!" muttered the young lady as she sighed sadly. "What should I do then?" she did not throw the question particularly at Ram and Paramanand, but it gave vent to her predicament.

"What is the problem with you, my sister?" asked Ram.

"My mother, on a visit to my uncle's house on the other side of the river a fortnight ago when there was only knee-deep water in the river, suddenly took ill and is in a critical condition since two days. She wants me to be by her side. It is urgent. But how can I cross the river?" The lady betrayed deep anguish.

"You must walk along the bank eastward if you wish to find a ferry," said Paramanand and he stepped into the waters.

"My sister, I can carry you to the other shore if you don't mind sitting on my shoulders," proposed Ram. He was strong and his voice was vibrant with sincerity and sympathy.

The girl smiled through her tears. Ram went closer to her and knelt down. She sat astride on his shoulders. Ram followed Paramanand and carefully crossed over to the other side and knelt down once again. The young lady alighted from his shoulders and thanked him and ran towards her uncle's village.

"Poor girl! she was so anxious to be with her ailing mother!" observed Ram. But Paramanand made no comment. He pulled a long face and conducted himself in a manner as if, so far as he was concerned, Ram had ceased to exist!

Paramanand's aloofness remained unchanged even during their return journey. If at all he spoke, he was curt and rude towards his companion. Ram was surprised, but he knew that some people were moody.

Back at their Ashram, they met their guru. "Was your travel to and fro your destination smooth?" asked the guru.

"Oh yes, Guruji, it was quite pleasant," said Ram. But Paramanand said nothing.

"Go and eat well and take rest. You must be tired," the guru told them affectionately.

The two disciples went away, but a little later Paramanand was back with the guru.

"What's the matter with you? Why do you look so gloomy?" asked the guru.

"Guruji, Ram told you that our journey was pleasant. Perhaps it was so for him. But so far as I'm concerned, it was quite unpleasant, thanks to Ram's conduct. He did something horribly undesirable!" replied Paramanand.

"Is that so? What did he do?' asked the guru, a bit intrigued.

"How many times we have been warned against touching women! But Ram did as grotesque a thing as lifting one—a

young one at that—and carrying her on his shoulders! I shudder to think of it. Yes, Guruji, she was young and beautiful too! Maybe, she was sixteen or seventeen or...."

"Never mind her exact age, Paramanand, we will look into the matter," said the guru, showing the disciple to a corner of the room. Paramanand went over there and sat down, but murmured, as if to himself, "To carry a young lady on shoulders across the river! My my!"

The guru sent for Ram. "Didn't you encounter any difficulty on the way?" he asked the disciple.

"Difficulty? No, Guruji! The weather was good and the greater part of the road was shaded by trees. Yes, the only difficulty could have been caused by the river if at all it were in spate. But the level of the water was not higher than my chest. I even carried a traveller through the waters!"

"A traveller, eh? A young lady—a beautiful one—of sixteen or seventeen and you call her a mere traveller, eh!'' shouted Paramanand unable to contain his anguish any longer.

"Right, she was a young lady in distress," calmly said Ram.

"What happened to her?" asked the guru.

"She alighted on the other side of the river-bank and ran away! Her mother, she said, had taken seriously ill...."

"Very well. You may go."

Ram left. The guru signed Paramanand to come near him.

"Paramanand, will you please shake the young lady of sixteen or seventeen—and a beautiful one at that—off your neck?" gravely asked the guru.

"Off my neck, Guruji? I never touched her! she sat on Ram's neck," fumbled out Paramanand, caressing his own neck.

"So far as Ram is concerned the lady at once left him once they had crossed the river. But so far as you are concerned, she has not left you for all these hours. In fact, the dangerous rider is firmly seated on you, growing more and more voluptuous by the hour, with your miserable throat in her

grip. She may throttle you unless you make a manly effort to shake her off!" said the guru.

Paramanand stood in silence, his head hung. Slowly his eyes grew tearful. "I realise my stupidity, sir," he said in a choked voice.

⊠⊠ We generally judge a man from his action, but since times immemorial Indian mysticism had laid emphasis on the consciousness behind the action. This tale, with its precise comment, is a sharp satire on the orthodox followers of external rules who fail to realise the spirit behind the rules. ⊠⊠

Crossing the River

The celebrated Pundit had many disciples and admirers. Among them was the landlord of the area who lived on the other side of the river.

The landlord had commissioned a poor milkmaid, Moti, to supply a tumblerful of milk to the Pundit, everyday in the morning. The milkmaid discharged her duty faithfully, day after day. She crossed the river by the help of a ferry boat and returned home in the same way after delivering the milk at the Pundit's household. Often the pundit himself received the milk. Moti prostrated before him.

She did not fail in her duty even if on some days it rained heavily.

"What a great privilege it is to serve a great Pundit!" she would tell those who would sympathise with her for her continuous toil.

The Pundit was an eloquent speaker. Whenever he gave a discourse, hundreds of people gathered to listen to him. The milkmaid too made it a point to stand behind the audience. Not that she understood much, but she was sure that the Pundit was speaking about God and Truth and similar tough and complex matters. "How much knowledge the man must be possessing to hold so many people spellbound for hours. Only one who is very near to God and Truth can command such wisdom!" she thought. She was happy that she made a humble contribution towards the Pundit's physical well being by regularly supplying him with pure milk.

"Even if the landlord fails to pay me for the milk and my labour I will not fail in my duty!" she resolved.

One day, while receiving the milk, the Pundit told Moti, "Woman! Can you bring the milk at least an hour before the sunrise for only a month? I am under a vow for performing a certain ritual for which I need the milk that early."

"I will do as you say, O Master!" the milkmaid assured him enthusiastically.

But the next day, by the time she reached the Pundit's house, it was already daybreak.

"Pardon me, Master, for my lapse. But what could I do?" said the milkmaid apologetically. "I was present on the bank of the river long before sunrise. But the boatman did not turn up that early even though I had informed him of the need for me to cross the river while it was still dark! He said since the river is in spate it would not be possible for him to ply the boat in darkness."

"You could not cross the river without the boatman, eh? I wonder how then the mystics say that one could cross even the ocean of life by uttering the name of Vishnu!" commented the Pundit jocularly, sure that the poor woman would hardly understand the import of his wise observation.

"Well, sir, nobody had told me that!" said Moti in a murmur.

"That is a secret!" said the Pundit once again jocularly.

"Who but a pious and great sage like you could ever know such secrets! Thank you for passing it on to me," said Moti.

The Pundit could not check himself from bursting into a loud guffaw at the woman's naivety.

Days passed. The period of the Pundit's vow came to an end. He told the milkmaid, "Moti, I must say that you have served me very well. I appreciate the pains you took in getting up in the small hours and milking the cow and delivering the milk to me at dawn. I bless you!"

Moti bowed to him. "So, sir, from tomorrow I report as before, soon after the sunrise; is that all right?"

"Fine," said the Pundit. And then he remembered the boatman. "Moti!" he said, "Tell the boatman how pleased I am with him."

"But, sir, I never bothered him, knowing well that he could not come that early!" said Moti.

"Who then plied the boat for you?"

"Boat? Why Sir? I did not need any boat!"

"How then did you cross the river?"

"Good God!" muttered Moti. "You, who can remember hundreds of pages of scriptures, forgot the secret you passed on to me the other day?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Pundit, intrigued.

"I just utter the name of Vishnu and walk across the river! The water remains ankle-deep for me!"

"Ankle-deep? But isn't the river in spate? Isn't it a fact that even in the hottest summer there is enough water in the river for boats to ply?" asked the Pundit.

"But I apply the secret!" Moti was surprised that the Pundit had totally forgotten his own secret formula!

"I see!"

"So, now you remember !" said Moti feeling happy. "From tomorrow I will take recourse to the boat. Let me apply the secret for the last time while returning today."

Moti stepped out onto the road. It was a foggy dawn. No doubt the woman was kidding him—concluded the Pundit and he followed her tiptoe.

Upon reaching the river-bank, Moti put her empty pot down and, with folded hands, paid obeisance to the river. Then, picking up the pot, she stepped into the water.

Struck dumb, the Pundit saw her crossing the river, walking with ease.

The Pundit almost fainted.

⊠⊠ While demonstrating the miracle of faith, the story also draws a contrast between scholarship and innocence, between the knowledge which scholarship secures, but which remains a mere theory and the knowledge that works through one's complete faith and surrender to the Lord. ⊠⊠

The Miraculous Contact

"How lucky are you!" observed Lord Vishnu affectionately surveying Sage Narada, as the latter lifted his head after bowing to his Lord. The sage had just returned to Vaikunth after one of his occasional wanderings upon the earth.

"No doubt I'm lucky, my Lord, for I never stop chanting your name!"

"You are lucky because you pay visit to the earth again and again and often come in contact with my devotees—those good and blessed souls," explained Vishnu.

Was merely coming in contact with the devotees, good and blessed though they were, such a great boon? wondered Narada, and unable to contain his doubt for long, asked Vishnu, "O Lord, I am sure that coming in contact with a true devotee is a memorable privilege. I look forward to such experiences. Even so, your observation intrigues me. Could that be so important that even you should consider one lucky on that account?"

The Lord smiled. "Narada, would you like to put the truth of my observation to test?"

Narada was a bit embarrassed at the suggestion, for there was no question of even an iota of error being there in what Vishnu said. At the same time, irresistible was his curiosity. Here was probably yet another opportunity to witness an act of the Lord's mystery!

"I suggest, O Narada," said Vishnu, "that you proceed to the forest Dandakaranya. On its western part, at the foot of a hill, stands an old banyan tree. In a nest in one of its

hollows, there is an infant bird. In fact, it has come out of its shell only an hour ago. The infant bird should be able to impart to you the truth you wish to know."

Narada was surprised at the suggestion that he could expect spiritual wisdom from a chick! But he left for Dandakaranya without delay as his surprise soon gave way to curiosity. He did not rest until he found the banyan tree. Indeed, in one of its hollows was a nest in which an infant

bird was beginning to flutter its tiny wings. It was yet to know the sunlight or the breeze.

Narada touched the bird affectionately. The bird stared at him. But before Narada could put his question to it, it shut its eyes. Alas! It was dead.

Narada was shocked. He buried the bird and returned to his Master.

"Why do you look so grim, my noble friend? It seems you are yet to receive an answer to your question!" observed Vishnu when his eyes fell on Narada.

"My Lord, you surely know that I stand more puzzled than ever!" said Narada.

"Is that so?" Vishnu grew thoughtful for a moment. "Well, on the outskirts of the city of Ayodhya, on the banks of the river Sarayu, lives the king's gardener. His cow has just given birth to a calf. I suggest that you put your question to that new-born calf," was Vishnu's instruction.

Narada left for Ayodhya at once. Before long he stood in front of the gardener's hut.

"Is it true that your cow has given birth to a calf?" he asked the gardener.

Delighted to see a holy man, the gardener received him with reverence and led him to the backyard of his hut. There stood the new-born calf close to its fond mother.

"O sage, how compassionate of you to come and bless this calf!" said the gardener.

"How lovely!" said Narada as he patted the handsome calf on the back.

The calf fixed its eyes on Narada's face for a moment and then fell sprawling on the ground. Narada shrank back. Had the fate that had befallen the infant bird had now overtaken the calf too? His suspicion proved true. The gardener examined the calf with great anxiety and found it dead. He looked at the sage, perplexed beyond words.

A nonplussed Narada retreated hastily.

"O Lord, I did not expect you to cause me such embarrassment when all I wanted was to know the benefit of one's association with your blessed devotees!" Narada told Vishnu, his voice betraying his wounded sentiments.

"Have patience, O wise sage, it was far from my intention to cause you any embarrassment. In fact, I was hardly doing anything except helping you find the answer to your own question," said Vishnu with a smile of compassion. "A prince has been born to the king of Malava. I can assure you that if you meet the infant prince, you will return fully satisfied."

Narada was hesitating when Vishnu added, "I have no doubt that you will do as I say, for you have never done otherwise!"

Indeed, be the outcome delightful or humiliating, a true devotee of the Lord never hesitated to act in accordance with the Lord's wish. Narada was again his usual jolly self. He was seen before long entering the king's palace.

The king recognised the sage and was overwhelmed with joy.

"O great soul, your visit is simply God-sent for us, for we have just been blessed with a son. What could be more desirable for us than your visit on such an auspicious day? Wont' you be kind enough to touch and bless my child?" the king said with folded hands.

Narada nodded despite his trepidation. "I wish and pray that the prince does not go the way the bird and the calf went"! he told himself. But his trust in the Lord helped him to gather courage.

"I will be happy to bless the prince, but I will like to be alone with him for a while," said Narada.

"As you wish and as you order, O great sage," said the king.

The queen and her maids withdrew from the bonny baby-prince's room. As Narada touched the infant, it looked at the sage. A sweet smile played on its lips.

"You are supposed to satisfy a query of mine. What is the benefit of one's association with a true devotee?" Narada asked the child.

"Must you ask me even when your question had been answered through a demonstration?" answered the baby-prince.

"I don't understand you," confessed Narada.

"Born as a bird I came in touch with you for the twinkling of an eye, O good and great devotee, and my spirit got an upward push and I was born as a calf. I came into your blessed contact once again. My spirit got a farther elevation. I abandoned my bovine form and here I am—re-incarnated as a human being, a prince at that! I bow to you, O great Narada!" said the infant beaming with joy.

Narada stood thrilled. He blessed the prince and departed, singing the glory of the Lord.

Satsang is a term much popular among the folks. It means contact with a person who lives in God-consciousness accelerates one's spiritual progress. This is the theory illustrated in the story and stretched to its extreme possibility.

Narada is a unique character in mythology. He is a godly being, yet unlike the other gods, he is a sage and a seeker, a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. He is a major link between heaven and earth and a favourite instrument of Vishnu in perpetuation of the *Leela,* the Divine Play.

The Strange Case of a Blanket

Some Sadhus were on their way to a pilgrim town. Long was the way and they avoided carrying items which were not extremely indispensable.

They carried two blankets each, one to spread on the ground when they took rest and to cover themselves with the other. Long was the way and a spell of rain had made the weather worse. But they took all such hazards in their stride and walked on through many a villages and towns and sometimes through forests.

It was an evening. They were walking along a river-bank. The river was in spate. Probably some distant village had already been invaded by its water and the current carried the booty, chunk of a thatch, a piece of furniture and an umbrella, etc., etc.

Among the pilgrims was a fat Sadhu named Tima Baba. He clucked and regretted the fact that the umbrella did not float close enough to the shore for him to pick it up. But as he eyed the umbrella wistfully, something else, something more valuable, caught his sight.

"Look, look, there goes a blanket!" he almost shouted.

"Indeed, but why only a blanket, the flood, like time, must be carrying several other things away too," commented a senior member of the group.

"Just as we are fond of possessing things, the time is fond of dispossessing us of them!" commented another pilgrim.

"But this one appears to be quite a thick piece! Shouldn't we salvage it?" asked the fat Sadhu.

"How can we?" asked a fellow-traveller.

"The real question is, why should we? Don't we have two blankets each?" asked the senior Sadhu.

The fat one did not seem to hear them. His eyes were glued to the object floating away. He increased his pace to cope up with the speed of the current. Then he took his shoulder-bag off and thrust it into the unwilling hands of a friend.

"Hold this. I must fetch that blanket," he announced.

"Fetch the blanket from this mad, mad flood? Are you mad?" buzzed several voices.

"I can swim well. I shall be back with the blanket in a moment. It is too precious a thing to be ignored."

The fat Sadhu did not wait to hear anybody's opinion any longer. He took off his ochre robe and threw it on another companion and jumped into the river.

He was no doubt a good swimmer. He soon managed to buffet through the whirling water and reach the object of his desire and tried to grab it. In the dusk his companions could not clearly see what was happening mid-stream. But it appeared to them that both the Sadhu and the blanket were being carried away by the current.

"What are you doing, Tima Baba? Have you got hold of the blanket?" asked a pilgrim.

"I have, but I don't understand how the blanket too got hold of me. It is almost drowning me!" complained Tima Baba. There was anxiety in his voice.

"In that case, why don't you let go the blanket?" his companions suggested loudly. "Your life is far more precious than the blanket!"

"Alas, I've left the blanket, but the blanket refuses to leave me!" was the last cry of Tima Baba.

There was silence thereafter. However, the keen-eyed among the pilgrims soon realised the mystery to their shock. What Tima Baba mistook for a blanket was in fact a bear. A landslide must have thrown it into the river. Tima Baba became the victim of a desperate bear-hug the moment he gave a tug at the beast in the hope of winning a blanket.

⊠ ⊠ Another version of the story briefly narrated by Swami Vivekananda speaks of the Sadhu returning to reclaim his blanket which he had by mistake left under a tree and on which meanwhile a bear had lain down.

Of the several allegorical elements in the story, the main one is the blanket as a symbol of unrequited greed. The passage to the pilgrim town stands for life's journey to its destination and Tima Baba's attraction for a superfluous third blanket—symbolising desire for the sake of desire—the greatest hurdle in one's inner journey. ⊠ ⊠

The Forgotten Vow

On the bank of the river Godavari stood a small hut. The sage who lived in it was dear to all, but not to the zamindar of the village. The wealthy zamindar desired to buy the small plot of land on which the sage lived. But the farmer who owned it would not part with it.

"I shall pay you more than the price you are likely to get from anybody else," the zamindar assured the farmer.

"You are very generous, Sir, but how can I sell the land to you? I know that you will drive the sage away from it once the land becomes yours," the farmer said calmly.

The zamindar became angry. "Don't go on referring to him as a sage! What do you know of saints and sages? I tell you that he is no better than you or I!" he blurted out.

"No, Sir, he is a sage. I know this from many signs," contested the farmer.

"Many signs? Can you tell me about one sign apart from his wearing the garb of a hermit?" challenged the wealthy man, trembling with anger. "Even I can put on ochre clothes and grow a beard!"

"You get angry so easily. Same is the case with me. But I have never seen the sage getting angry," said the farmer.

"What nonsense! You have never seen him getting angry because there has never been any cause for him to get angry. That is all! " asserted the zamindar. Then, after thinking over a plan for a moment, he added, lowering his voice, "I suggest that you roam around your sage's hut tomorrow in the

morning. I will show to you how he too grows angry like any of us."

"All right, let me see it," agreed the farmer.

"Will you change your mind and sell the plot of land to me if he gets angry?" demanded the zamindar.

"I will," agreed the farmer.

They parted. Next day, as decided, the farmer went near the sage's hut and waited to see the zamindar's plot at work. He felt unhappy to find a young man, notorious as a ruffian, approaching the sage. It was a tender morning and the sage sat writing something on a palm leaf in front of the hut. The ruffian stood behind him and spat on him.

The sage looked back. He saw that the ruffian did it deliberately. But, without uttering a word, he descended to the river and had a dip. He then came up, sat down again and resumed writing.

The ruffian spat on him again. The sage went and had a dip once again. This went on and on. Obviously, the ruffian was trying to make the sage angry. The farmer felt extremely sad. He repented for having agreed to the zamindar's condition instead of refusing his proposal straight away.

Farther away, behind a tree stood the zamindar. He was feeling surprised at the sage's poise and composure.

The trial of patience between the sage and the ruffian continued. Every time the sage emerged from the water, the ruffian spat and frowned on him, but the sage smiled at him and said nothing.

By and by the ruffian's face began to look pale.

The sage had taken one hundred and seven dips when the ruffian fell at his feet and said, "Noble sage, pardon this sinner! I harassed you in this manner because I was offered money for my mischief. But I cannot go on doing this! I do not know what will happen to me if you cast a curse on me!"

"Will you not spit on me once more?" asked the sage.

"I shall rather die than do such a thing," said the ruffian.

The sage smiled and lifted him up and said, "In fact, I should thank you. Years ago I decided that one day I will have one hundred and eight dips in the river Godavari, uttering her sacred name one hundred and eight times. I had not fulfilled my own vow perhaps out of laziness. In fact, I had forgotten all about it. Today you made me fulfil my vow. I am grateful to you. I must go and have yet another dip to complete the vow. This time I shall pray for you."

When the sage emerged from the water for the last time that day, the zamindar too fell flat at his feet. "I am the real sinner. I promised to pay the ruffian for going on spitting on you till you had got angry!" he confessed.

The sage laughed. "Had he confided to me the purpose of his action, I would have tried to show anger so that he appeared successful in his mission and received his reward!" he said.

"But he has done his best. You must not deprive him of his due," the farmer stepped in and pleaded on behalf of the ruffian.

"I wouldn't and I wouldn't ask you to sell your land to me either," said the zamindar.

He became a devotee of the sage who was none other than Saint Eknath.

⊠ ⊠ Cruelty or injustice inflicted on a pure soul may be rendered inconsequential so far as the victim is concerned, partly because he may not be touched by it and partly because it may fit into a slot in his destiny. This does not mean that the good never suffers in the hands of the bad, but this is one of the possibilities in the complex play of forces. ⊠ ⊠

Crazy in the Wilderness

Once upon a time, in a certain small city, there lived a merchant who traded in gold. He was beset with a disease and he came to know that his end was not far away. His only son was then very young. He was sure that it would be unsafe to leave his wealth, mostly gold, in his own house, under his son's care. Taking advantage of the boy's immaturity, the wicked ones could plunder him thoroughly.

He suddenly found a ray of hope in a poor man whom he had once saved from the jaws of death. The man had since joined the merchant's household as a servant. The merchant trusted the simple-natured, able-bodied servant very much.

Though very ill, the merchant managed to put his gold and money in a chest. One dark night, with the help of the trusted servant, he carried the chest into a nearby forest. He selected a spot and buried the chest there.

"My dear fellow, never speak a word of the buried wealth to anybody but my son. He would naturally be your master after I am gone. Only when he grows up and asks you about the treasure, reveal it to him," the merchant instructed the servant.

The servant took an oath of secrecy and promised to do exactly as instructed.

Soon died the merchant, but not before confiding to his son about the hidden treasure. The son promised to keep his hands off the wealth until he had come of age.

Years passed. The boy grew up into a decent young man. He believed that time had come for him to make use of the hidden wealth.

"Uncle, will you now kindly reveal Father's treasure to me?" he asked the servant.

The servant, now old, looked happy. "I must, my young master, I must," he said enthusiastically. "I too have been thinking that it was high time you took possession of your property. I am growing old. If I die before you have located the treasure, it may remain ever beyond your reach and my soul will be without peace in the world beyond!"

At night the two entered the forest. Suddenly the servant stopped.

"What is the matter?" asked the young man.

"Shut up!" shouted the servant.

Taken aback, the young man lifted his torch of burning twigs and surveyed the man's face. The old man looked unbelievably haughty and his eyes rather spooky.

"What about the hidden treasure?" asked the young man humbly, as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Who are you to order me about? Am I your slave, you impudent chap?" yelled the fellow with menacing gestures.

The young man did not show any sign of anger. "Very well," he said calmly, and he turned to go. After a few seconds the servant began to follow him. On reaching home both retired to their respective rooms, but, needless to say, the young man could hardly sleep.

Next day the servant behaved quite normally.

A month passed. The young man broached the issue of the treasure once again. The servant said most eagerly, "Woe to me that I have not yet handed it over to you. I may die any day. Let's bring the wealth home tonight itself."

The young man was happy.

They set out again. But the servant suddenly stopped and, when the young man reminded him about their mission, he

shouted at him saying, "Don't you know who are you talking to? Behave yourself or get lost!"

The young man quietly turned and began walking homeward. The old man followed him meekly.

Not far from the merchant's house lived a nobleman—revered by all in the region for his wisdom. He had been a great friend of the late merchant, the young man's father.

The young man met him the next day and confided to him about his old servant's strange conduct. "I have lost the wealth for good, I'm afraid," he said with a sigh.

"Did the servant stop both the times at the same spot?" asked the wise one.

"Well, yes, yes," said the young man, recollecting in detail the servant's bizarre nocturnal conduct.

The landlord smiled. "You have almost found it," he said. "Next time when the man stops and shows signs of insolence, just push him off the spot and dig there and see," advised the nobleman.

The young man led the old servant into the forest once again. When suddenly the man stopped and goggled his red eyes at him, he pushed him aside and dug at the spot and found the chest. The servant looked on, blinking. After a moment he suddenly began to help his young master and both carried the treasure home.

When the young man met the nobleman and thanked him, the latter said, "The simple man was unable to check the vibrations which the buried wealth sent into him. Wealth is a power. Most people would lose their head when under its sway."

The mystic view of material objects was significant. Everything emanated an occult force, always subtle, and while man managed matter, unknown to man, matter also managed him! This fact became more concrete when it concerned money or any other medium of wealth like gold. Such matters imbibed in them strong vibrations of desire and greed. They exercised considerable power on an average man's nature. It is only he who masters his own nature can be a true master of wealth.

The Seeker of Happiness

Once upon a time there was a man who had everything that ought to make a man happy. He was the biggest landlord of the region and his tenants were all a decent lot who never gave him any trouble. He was healthy. He had a faithful wife and obedient children. He rode and galloped and played and swam to keep his body fit and energetic. Because of his kind nature and philanthropic dispositions, the people loved him and his fame spread far and wide.

But he knew that he was not quite happy and was rather surprised that he was not! What did he lack that he felt unhappy—at least at times—and for no apparent reasons?

He thought about it for long and came to the conclusion that since all the conventional factors of happiness failed to satisfy him, he must seek happiness in an opposite set of conditions. By and by this became a firm conviction with him. He lived among people, power and wealth; happiness must be found far from the maddening crowd, in a humble and austere life-style. He lived in a huge mansion, abounding in man-made means of comfort. Happiness perhaps lay somewhere in Nature—amidst calm and serene hills and forests under the blue sky swept by free wild breeze.

And one day he took a decisive step. He broke away from his surroundings at the dead of night. He walked on and on, donning a disguise so that even his own officials failed to rocognise him when they passed by him in a frantic search for their missing master.

He left his home far behind.

At last he found a place that fitted his dream of solitude most ideally. It was a hill-top, overlooking a sleepy little valley. The hill-top was rich in trees and plants bearing a varieties of fruits, flowers and berries. A murmuring cascade kept the cosy place cool. Birds celebrated the sunrise with songs. The sunset and the moonrise were magnificent—as if they were exclusive to that valley and the hill-top and, to be more precise, to the solitary dweller on it!

The man at whose desire and order mansions were raised, now built a hut for himself, with his own hands. It was a simple thing and the work was done in a day. He viewed at it with great satisfaction. Alone—all alone —set free from desires and tensions, he will now have all the happiness to himself.

Surely, he was happy. Days rolled on smoothly.

Once in a while, a vague yearning for something that was still missing from his life, disturbed his heart. But he dismissed such feelings as intrusion by stray thoughts, hangover of the old habits of restlessness. He mustered his will in favour of enjoying an unbroken happiness.

Then came the monsoon. One afternoon a mad mad wind invaded the hill-top. Its erratic gusts shook his hut. He tried to save it lending his support to its doddering pillars, but in vain. The battle continued for long. Then, for the first ever time in his life, he prayed to God, "Kindly intervene and save my hut!"

But God did not seem to hear. When he knew that the hut was about to collapse, he cried out, "O God, I offer this to you. Now this is yours. Surely, you are going to save it!"

God seemed to be unresponsive even then. The storm blew off a part of the hut. Suddenly he laughed. "How callous of you, O God, that you do nothing to save your own property!" he shouted through the shrieks of wind.

And he laughed on till the remaining portion of the hut too was gone and, lashed by the storm, he swooned away.

Upon opening his eyes, he found himself at a new place, under the loving care of friendly strangers.

This is what had happened.

The poor folks of the hamlets below the hill used to see him from distance. They had taken him to be a hermit. They had brought him down and nursed him.

"Let me return to my hill-top," said the seeker of happiness.

"Wait," implored the villagers. "You're still weak. Besides, we feel so happy to serve you. Be with us for a month."

When, finally the villagers led him up the hill, what should he see but a nice little shrine with a charming deity, and a room for himself! The villagers had built them for their hermit!

Instantly as if a veil that covered his eyes slipped down, he knelt, shivering with a strange sensation of delight and discovery. Indeed, unknown to his mind, this is what his soul was seeking. The vague yearning that disturbed him from time to time was for this!

He also realised that when he offered his doddering hut to God, He did accept it despite the appearance to the contrary. God accepted it only to give it back to him, changing it into a shelter that could withstand a storm—and with a symbol of Himself installed in it as a proof that He had accepted the offering and had come to dwell in it!

⊠⊠ What does make one happy? There may be many answers to this question. But the essential answer from the mystic point of view is, man can be happy only when his soul has been satisfied. The installation of the deity in the hut is the figurative portrayal of the recognition of the soul as the dominant element in one's being. ⊠⊠

The Bare-Handed Baba

The people of Shankhapur played hosts to numerous mendicants and pilgrims, partly because the road to the famous temple of Sri Jagannath at Puri lay through the village and partly because the village was situated on the bank of a river and if the river was in spate, the pilgrims took shelter in the village.

And the village shrine had a spacious hall or two to accommodate the travellers.

One of the holy men who occasionally passed through the village or camped in the shrine was the "Bare-handed Baba", so called because he would carry nothing for himself.

Well, there did not even arise the question of anybody else carrying anything for him because he would not have any companion on his journey to any of his destinations.

But he was loved by all. People often tried to push things into his hands for his benefit. In that, of course, they failed. If he needed to eat and if he got some food, he was pleased to make use of it. But he would not collect and preserve a single item of food for the next time when he would feel hungry.

"Why, Babaji, is it wrong to think of tomorrow?" people asked him often. Ordinarily he would smile and evade the question. But occasionally and very rarely he said—perhaps to such people who deserved an answer —"It is not a question of right or wrong. I follow a certain discipline. I don't ask

anybody else to follow it. According to my discipline I must live from moment to moment. I live in God and God is Time—past, present and future. Why should I worry about the future?"

It was difficult to accept his philosophy, but there was something charming about him. That was perhaps his own complete trust in his peculiar way of surrendering to God. He attracted many, but he did not seem to be attracted by anybody or by anything.

Jombudas was a successful merchant. Lately he had retired from his worldly business as his able sons had taken over his burden. He had earned enough wealth in his life. He wondered if he should not try his hands churning out some spiritual merit.

"I will follow you," he told the hermit sportively.

The hermit looked at him curiously, but said affectionately, "If you like my way of life, follow it by all means. You need not follow me physically!"

Jombudas was not sure what really attracted him— the hermit or his ideal. He thought for a while and came to the conclusion that it will be easier for him to follow the hermit physically than ideally.

But the hermit was unwilling to have a follower on his travels. "You cannot do as I do. Your habits and your attitude to life would not allow you to do so," he told him.

"How did you know? Give me at least a chance to prove that I can follow you!" Jombudas insisted.

"All right," said the hermit. "Promise that if you fail to act exactly like me even once, you will leave me alone."

Jombudas promised.

The hermit was setting out for his next destination which was unknown to Jombudas. However, he followed him, but not without a shoulder bag containing a few essential things.

They walked for several hours and stopped at an inn. The innkeeper knew the hermit. He was very happy to accommodate both and feed them well.

Beyond the inn was a wilderness stretching for miles. Early in the morning Jombudas asked the hermit, "Are we to cross the wilderness?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid, we may not find any food on our way. Should we not carry some?" asked Jombudas.

"You know very well that I do not carry anything! God will give me food if that becomes necessary," said the hermit.

"But God has to perform a miracle if He has to give you food in the wilderness! I understand that there are not even fruit-yielding trees!" observed Jombudas.

"He will perform the miracle then," calmly said the hermit.

They set out on their journey at sunrise. Hours passed. It became noon time. Jombudas was waiting to see the miracle. His hope faded.

"Are you not hungry?" he asked the hermit.

"I am."

"Come on, then," said Jombudas with a chuckle. He brought out from his bag two parcels of food which he had collected at the inn before starting.

They sat down near a lake and ate. Then, with a triumphant laugh, Jombudas said, "Well, it pays to be prudent! I knew that nothing will be available here. And all the while I was waiting to see the miracle you hoped God will perform for you. Well, He did not care!"

The hermit fixed his gaze on Jombudas. "He did care," he said. "The parcel you handed over to me was God's miracle for me. But for you, it was a failure. By carrying it with you, you failed to do as I do. I hope, you remember the condition."

Jombudas was stunned. "You go your way and I go my way," said the hermit as he walked away leaving Jombudas behind.

⊠⊠ Through the ages numerous experiments have been made, numerous paths taken, by different schools of seekers after the ultimate reality. Every path has a truth in it—though to the follower of another path it might appear dusky and dangerous. Even the doctrine of surrender can be practised in different ways, depending on the nature of one's faith. The story illustrates one such way. ⊠⊠

An Experiment with a Cup of Oil

It was not very unusual for Lord Vishnu and his dear devotee and personal emissary, Sage Narada, to roam the streets of the earth. Needless to say, they moved about assuming such appearances—looking either like merchants or pilgrims—that nobody would suspect their identity.

They were passing by an inn when a man who looked like a petty trader, came out of it. Vishnu folded his hands and raised them to his forehead in the way of showing his respect to the man who, of course, did not notice his gesture.

"My Lord, who does not know about your extraordinary humility! You went even to the extent of massaging the feet of a chap who had the uncanny audacity to kick you. You thought that by implanting the kick, the chap would have hurt himself! But, after all, that chap—Shrivatsa—was a sage. What about this trader who does not seem to be in any way different from any other ordinary worldly man? I am surprised that you became so respectful towards him."

"Narada, you know, I'm very fond of my devotees. The man, no doubt, is a trader, an ordinary man of the world. But he is a true devotee of mine," replied Vishnu.

The man in question did not show any sign of being a devotee of Vishnu. He wore no necklace of Tulsi beads nor was there any mark on his forehead to suggest his spiritual orientation. Narada, naturally, was intrigued.

"My Lord, I must confess that I have developed a great curiosity about the man. Can I stay back to observe him for a while?" asked Narada.

"Why not!" commented Vishnu.

They parted company, Vishnu finding his way to Vaikunth and Narada hurrying up to follow the man.

Soon Narada caught up with the man and befriended him, introducing himself as a pilgrim. It was evening when the trader reached his home.

"Pilgrim, Sir, you look tired. Why don't you take rest for a day or two in my house? I will deem myself lucky if you do so," suggested the trader.

Narada jumped at the opportunity. He became trader's guest and keenly observed everything he did throughout the day.

The trader looked after his business with utmost care. He also gave great attention to problems which the villagers put before him for they knew him to be a man of conscience and an ideal judge of men and matters. Narada's curiosity was not satiated. The trader showed no sign of being a devotee of any magnitude for which even the Lord himself should revere him.

"My Lord, thanks for letting me befriend an ideal man. But I wonder if you did not mistake him to be somebody else—some ardent devotee of yours whom the trader resembled!" said Narada when he was back at Vaikunth.

"Did he show no sign of his devotion for me? Are you sure of that?" asked Vishnu.

"Well, early in the morning, while leaving his bed, he called out to you only once—and once again at night, while retiring to his bed, he did the same thing. My Lord, there are thousands of people who chant your name all the time and there are still more who do so at frequent intervals. In what way could the trader be superior to them?"

"It is good you raised the question. We will find out the answer shortly. Meanwhile, we have to solve another problem. Is it possible for one to walk round the earth, holding an open cup filled to its brim with oil, without spilling a drop of it? What do you think about it, Narada?"

"I feel tempted to take up the challenge!" Narada was enthusiastic.

"Good. Let it be so."

Things were arranged accordingly. The great sage set out on his round-the-earth walking mission with a cup full of oil.

The oil was about to spill out of the pot every moment. But Narada remained unswervingly alert and never let it happen. With great concentration he balanced the cup with both his palms and completed his mission successfully. It took him a full day and a night.

Beaming triumphantly, Narada placed the cup in front of Vishnu and greeted him with folded hands.

"What happened to you, Narada, since you set out? I was rather anxious! I received no signal from you. I was about to try find out on my own, when you arrived," observed Vishnu with a meaningful smile.

It did not take Narada long to realise the significance of Vishnu's observation. He woke up with a shock to the fact that he had not been able to remember Vishnu even for once during his preoccupation with the oil-cup. He stood in silence, his head hung. Even then what evaded his grasp was the need for this experiment with the oil-cup. Vishnu explained, "Narada, to lead a worldly life properly, with truthfulness and courage, requires no less alertness than guarding the oil-cup, checking even a drop of its content from spilling out. The trader discharged his duties successfully, yet he did not forget to remember me at least twice a day. Isn't that a sign of a true devotee?"

Narada stood enligtened.

The story emphasises the importance of remaining in the world amidst the so called mundane preoccupations and yet remembering the Divine—a task far more difficult than breaking away from all the normal activities and devoting oneself exclusively to chanting the Lord's name or meditating on him.

The Ochre Garb

Several kinds of festivities were organised during the Dusserah at the Zamindar's house. There were competitions too in singing, story-telling and other skills. The Zamindar handed out rewards to those who, according to the jury, proved most meritorious in different items.

Once there was a fancy dress competition with a number of young men appearing in different disguises. One acted out the role of a king, another that of a jester, a third one appeared as a hunter, one presented himself as a courtesan and yet another as a drunkard.

But the one who excelled all was the young village teacher—who appeared as an ascetic. He was in a simple ochre garb and he sported a false beard. He sang briefly and that cast a spell on the audience. All were transported to an unearthy mood.

He was the last participant in the fancy dress show and while the audience applauded his performance, the spokesman of the jury whispered to the Zamindar that he had been adjudged the best in that contest.

"Come here!" the Zamindar called out to the young man as he descended from the stage. "Here is your reward!" the Zamindar announced.

"Pardon me, sir!" said the young man and he went out of the sight of the audience.

"Surprising!" commented the Zamindar. "The chap is not interested in his reward !"

There was an interval between the fancy dress show and the next item in the programme for the evening. The Zamindar and the jury were sipping *sharbat.*

"Here I am, Sir!"

The young teacher was back, but in his usual clothes, without the ochre garb and the beard. "Be pleased to hand over my reward!"

"Why did you not receive it earlier?" asked the surprised Zamindar.

"Sir, I was still in the role of an ascetic. How can an ascetic be interested in money? Could I have claimed perfection in that role if I had accepted the reward?" said the teacher politely. The Zamindar and the jury appreciated his explanation. But the teacher had something more to add: "Sir, believe me, as long as I was in the ascetic's garb, a spirit of renunciation dominated my consciousness. I really did not feel like accepting anything!"

⊠⊠ Mystics believe that the ochre garb is not just an identity, but an influence. It helps to calm the worldly passions.

In Sri Ramakrishna's version of the story, the actor was a *Bohurupee,* one adept at assuming different appearances. ⊠⊠

Brahma Face to Face with the Brahma

Laloo was a good-natured boy but was often told by the sage in whose Ashram he lived, "My boy, it pays to be prudent. Do not over-do things."

It is difficult to say how seriously Laloo took his mentor's advice—rather how much he understood it, though he never confessed to having failed to understand anything at all of the guru's teachings—from Vedanta to Samkhya. When the guru explained a text, he was the first man in the audience to repeatedly nod indicating how much he appreciated or rather approved of the explanation!

It was a bright morning and Laloo was on his way to his home after almost a year. None of his childhood friends had the privilege to live in an Ashram. Every time he went home, they gathered around him in order to benefit by his wisdom.

This time Laloo was prepared to tell them something that was sure to startle them. Lately the sage explained to his students the mystery of Brahma—the Supreme Reality that pervaded the universe. All was Brahma—said the sage—all the human beings, all the animals, all the birds, the trees, the hills—all, all was Brahma!

This was a knowledge quite exciting to him. He saw everything around him in a new light. The hill, the trees, the river, the grazing cattle in the fields to his left, the boys playing hide and seek amidst the bushes to his right,

appeared quite interesting to him because they were all essentially one—the Brahma.

The road before him was long, tall trees on both its sides providing it with ample shade and keeping it cool.

An elephant was coming from the opposite direction, its mahout seated on it and humming a tune. A bullock-cart passing by Laloo moved to a side at the sight of the elephant. So did three or four pedestrians. But Laloo, walking right along the middle of the road, did not care. Just as he was himself the Brahma, so was the elephant. Why should Laloo-Brahma be scared of the elephant-Brahma? The carter and the pedestrians do not have the knowledge which he had. That explains their conduct. A wise man's conduct need not be similar to that of the ordinary ones!

"You boy, move to a side; don't you see what you are going to face?" one of the passers-by shouted at Laloo. Laloo looked at him displaying a smile of superiority, but showed no sign of being effected by the warning.

The elephant had come quite close to him.

"Get off its way, boy, get off its way!" the mahout himself shouted.

Laloo only threw a look of contempt at the rider. What does the fellow know of the mystery of the Brahma?

"Be careful boy, give way to the elephant!" shouted the mahout again, quite desperately.

And the elephant took hold of Laloo by its trunk, lifted him high and threw him on the roadside bush and marched on as if nothing had happened.

Nothing much, luckily, had happened to Laloo physically except that he had been bruised at several places all over his body. But much had happened to him mentally. He was in a state of daze.

The passers-by helped him to stand up and upon learning that he was an inmate of the nearby Ashram, put him in the bullock-cart and the carter was kind enough to carry him to the Ashram.

The surprised sage heard all that led him to his present condition. To the sage's question why he did not move away from the elephant's path, Laloo's was a simple answer: "Why should Laloo-Brahma be scared of the elephant-Brahma?"

"But why did Laloo-Brahma refuse to listen to the mahout-Brahma?" asked the sage.

Laloo, needless to say, had no answer to the sage's last question.

⊠⊠ There is a gulf of difference between mentally knowing a truth and realising the truth. Many are the people who, like Laloo, are content with their superficial knowledge of a theory, over and above the fact that they do not understand the full implication of the theory even at the mental plane—just as Laloo considered the elephant as Brahma but excluded the mahout from his Brahmic overview! ⊠⊠

The Miracle that Failed

Jagan had been to meet the sage who lived in a cave beyond the river. The sage was a great devotee of Hanuman. It was believed that he saw Hanuman everyday.

Jagan passed a day with the sage. But when he decided to return to his village and took leave of the sage and came to the river-bank, he found that the river was in spate. The ferry boat by which he had crossed the river had suspended its operation.

But he had most important work to perform at home. He could not tarry on that side of the river for yet another day. He did not know what to do. He walked along the road first in one direction and again in the opposite direction. He saw no boat. The rolling flood water looked violent. There was no way he could reach home.

A hope flashed in his mind. Probably the sage could help him. He had great faith in the sage.

By the time Jagan was back with the sage, it was almost evening. He told the sage the importance of his work at home. It concerned a rite at an auspicious moment and that moment would not come again in the near future. And the rite was important for saving his son from a particular danger.

The sage understood. He also knew that Jagan had full faith in him.

He wrote down something on a leaf, folded it and asked Jagan to hold it in his grip.

"Walk over the river quickly, your eyes closed, at some place where preferably nobody is there to observe you," said the sage.

Jagan bowed to the sage and hurried out. No soul was to be seen anywhere on the river-bank. He closed his eyes and, the leaf held tight, stepped onto the water.

It was strange sensation to walk on the water. He ran for sometime. Guessing that he must have come very close to the other shore, he opened his eyes.

Indeed, a few more steps and then he would be on the land. A great curiosity possessed him. What was it that the sage wrote on the tiny piece of leaf? He opened it and read: "Jai Hanuman".

Is that all? Could just a brief phrase—that too a quite familiar one—do so much? Was there nothing more in it?

With a splash he dropped into the bottom of the river. He struggled hard to come to the surface and battled against the current. He managed to reach the shore—almost dead. Some villagers found him and carried him to his home. It took him hours to regain his strength. And it took a long time to realise that the miracle had not failed him, but he had failed the miracle.

⊠⊠ Jagan's faith in the sage and the sage's faith in the phrase written on the leaf—the phrase charged with the power of his *Siddhi*—did the miracle. But the moment suspicion crept into Jagan's mind regarding the efficacy of such a simple phrase, its power became ineffective. ⊠⊠

The Serpent's Predicament

"Can I reach the next village through this meadow?" the sage asked some people.

"You can, but we suggest you to take to a detour. We all do that," they replied.

"But why? The meadow looks quite smooth and safe!"

"It is smooth and safe, but for a terrible cobra residing in a hole under a bush. It had bitten at least a score of travellers," the people informed him.

"That's rather unusual! No cobra is expected to make a habit of biting the innocent!" muttered the sage and, despite repeated warnings by the people, entered the meadow.

He could see the cobra raising its hood and looking at him ferociously. But the sage knew the hymns by which to tame the serpents. The cobra slowly lowered its head.

"You naughty one, what do you gain from biting the innocent people who are obliged to cross the meadow?" the sage asked the cobra. "They are not your food!"

"They are not innocent. The moment they see me they pick up a stone or raise their sticks. That terrifies me or at least infuriates me. I have developed a hatred for them. Hence I strike!" answered the cobra.

The sage sat down on a deserted ant-hill and told the snake what a curse it was to nurture hatred—and how hatred and happiness could never go together. He also taught it the secret of tolerance—and how tolerance and love would lead one to God which was the ultimate goal in the life of every creature, big or small.

The cobra felt entranced. It promised never again to bite a man and also promised to pass its time reflecting on the ultimate goal of life.

The sage blessed the cobra and reached the village beyond the meadow. The anxious villagers enquired if he faced no threat from the cobra which was notorious for its violent nature.

"The cobra will no longer be a threat to anybody," the sage assured them.

After a couple of days' stay in the village the sage left for his Ashram which was quite far. He had no occasion to visit the two villages on either side of the meadow for a full year.

One day he arrived in that locality and, before announcing his arrival to any village, felt an urge to find out how the cobra fared. It was dusk and he called out to the cobra several times. At last the serpent appeared before him hardly able to crawl and with signs of injury all over its body. It looked the ghost of itself.

"God God, what brought this about to you?" queried the anxious sage.

"Your blessings, O holy one, and the change in my philosophy of life resulting from your great teaching," answered the cobra sincerely.

By and by, the sage received the full report of the villagers' conduct towards the cobra over the year. Since the villagers learnt from the sage that the cobra would no longer be a menace to them, they braved into its presence. The cobra did not even hiss. Emboldened by its passivity, they began to hurl pebbles and sticks at it. Since it did not react even then, they found it fun to drag it by its tail to exhibit their power to strangers or their kinsmen from other villages!

The cobra also told him how much peace it enjoyed despite its miseries. It felt an overwhelming compassion for all.

Tears came to the sage's eyes. "My friend, I asked you not to bite the passers-by; did I ever ask you not to hiss? Please

resume raising your head and hissing. Your love for peace, the compassion you feel for others are matters of your inner self. You treasure them within; outwardly do whatever is necessary to protect yourself!" said the sage.

The serpent understood.

When the sage returned there yet another year later, the villagers complained to him that the cobra had grown ferocious again.

"You deserve it!" commented the sage.

▩▩ Non-violence is a state of Consciousness. In the world as it is, one's external conduct need not always reveal one's inner achievement. In any case, to *pretend* to be bad is better than to *pretend* to be good. ▩▩

A Project of Prolonged Thought!

Chikarao the money-lender had nothing much to do except sitting on the round brick platform his late father had built around the mango tree in the foreyard of his house. People met him there, borrowing or paying back with interest his money. Sitting there he enjoyed the breeze, kept an eye on the mango tree which abounded in fruit in the summer and looked at the road beyond his gate. Once in a while his eyes fell on a borrower who had failed to pay on time and he took the man to task for his default.

But he had also other satisfactions. For instance, there, very close to him, stood a bullock tied to a small pole. It was a handsome one and had been with him for more than three months. Its owner had pawned it to him.

Chikarao appreciated the bullock very much. It was handsome. Particularly its horns had grown harmoniously and their tips bent towards each other very gracefully. From the very first day Chikarao thought that the horns had space enough between them to accommodate his own head. In fact, the smug feeling which he thought he would have when his head would roundly fit into the horns was very tempting.

Practically everyday he reflected on the proposition. Should he sit on the bullock's back and bracket his head with those comely horns? It may be more convenient to do so standing in front of the bullock.

There was no more time to lose, for the bullock's owner had sent word that he was coming to pay his dues and get his animal released that very evening.

It would be unwise on his part to lose the bullock before getting his highly original fancy satisfied!

Chikarao cautiously mounted the bullock and pushed his head into its horns.

The otherwise docile bullock gave a start. It had obviously never had anything nearer to that experience. Panic writ large on its face, it leaped, uprooted the tiny pole to which it was tied, and then ran. It smashed Chikarao's bamboo gate and was on the road in no time.

Chikarao meanwhile tried his best to disentangle his head from the horns, but in vain. His legs astride on the bullock, and his head locked, he presented a bizarre spectacle to the people on the village road most of whom failed to make out anything of it.

Some village youths, however, took courage and surrounded the bullock and stopped it and helped Chikarao to come out of his predicament.

The dazed money-lender was carried home. He had received several bruises on his head and arms and a lots of bumps to tire all his limbs.

"Why did you do that?" the village elders asked him when he had sufficiently recovered from his trauma.

"Well... the space between the horns was so inviting and I was sure my head would be the best thing to be there!" Chikarao mumbled out.

"But you should have thought twice before doing such a thing!" commented the elders.

"You are speaking of thinking twice; are you? I thought a hundred times—once every day since the day the bullock was left in my custody! I thought for more than three months!" Chikarao replied with some anguish.

⊠⊠ The story is not only a comment on the irrational greed of man as well as on man's idle fancies, but also at a bit higher plane, on the farcical situations which mere thought—even though indulged in for a long time—can create, unless it is of a higher quality or supported by common sense, if not wisdom. A version of the story is to be found in *Tales of Wisdom* by Yogi Maharaj. ⊠⊠

Of Action and Consciousness

Gogu's family was almost starving. He used to collect dry wood from the forest and sell them or barter them for rice. That is how he maintained his wife, their two children and himself. But that season the rains continued for three weeks and there was no question of his getting any dry wood. Whatever he had stored in his house had been sold out.

He was a worried man. Suddenly an idea flashed across his mind. The idol in the village shrine was made of wood. Why not reduce the image into chips and sell them?

The night was quite dark. Armed with an axe Gogu scaled the temple wall. The priest had not bothered to lock the doors of the shrine. He pushed them open. A lamp was still burning before the deity.

To carry the image would be difficult. But he could cut it into two and make the task easy for himself. He raised his axe.

"Wait, you fool!" was a voice heard by Gogu.

Gogu lowered his weapon.

"You want money. Well, have a dip in the river at sunrise, keeping your right fist clenched. Go home and open your palm. You will find what you want," the voice said.

Gogu decided to give the voice the benefit of doubt. He returned home without destroying the image.

In the morning he did as advised. Lo and behold! He found a chip of gold when he opened his fist!

He repeated the ritual the next day. He was again rewarded with gold.

In a year's time the villagers saw Gogu's hut changing into a mansion. So many servants attended upon him. Villagers called him Goguji and Gogu Sahib instead of 'Poor Gogu'!

His immediate neighbour was Sadasiv, a poor teacher. The small Sanskrit school at which he was teaching had been closed down. He was tired of looking for a job.

His wife managed to find out from Gogu's wife the secret of their affluence. "Look here," she told Sadasiv, "Threaten the deity with an axe and that will put an end to our misery."

"How can I do that?" Sadasiv almost shrieked out. But ultimately his wife's argument prevailed.

It was drizzling. At midnight Sadasiv entered the shrine. Even though he managed to raise the axe, he was sweating profusely. His hands were not steady.

He fainted and collapsed.

"You misguided one!" Sadasiv's consciousness recorded a voice, "Did you really believe that you could have done this? Is the ignorant Gogu your model? Your *Swadharma* would not have allowed you to do what he was ready to do. Go back and struggle, remembering God. That is your way—a way far superior to that to Gogu."

Sadasiv regained his sense and returned home.

⊠⊠ Gogu's sudden rise to affluence does not mean that he was luckier, speaking spiritually, than Sadasiv. Gogu had no conscience; the boon he received did not mean anything for him other than a gain out of a bargain. There was no gap between his Consciousness and his action. So far as Sadasiv was concerned, the gulf between his consciousness and what he proposed to do, even though it was a mere threat, was wide. Consequence of his action—had he taken recourse to it—would have been terrible. ⊠⊠

Of the Nose behind the Nose-Ring

The great poet and saint, Tulsidas, was reading out some cantos from his *Ramacharitamanasa* in front of a village shrine. He sat on a raised platform, his enchanted listeners facing him on the green grass. There were hundreds of them.

When his recitation and discourse were over, the audience began to disperse. Some of them came closer to him and prostrated themselves to him. The saint blessed them.

"Santhji, it is getting late. Let's go home, for I know you would neither eat your dinner nor retire to bed before bathing and doing your Puja and meditation," the village landlord, who was the saint's host, told him politely.

Tulsidas nodded and stood up, ready to leave. But his eyes fell on a half-veiled young lady standing in a corner of the platform. She obviously hesitated to come near the great man.

"Are you waiting for me, my child?" the compassionate saint asked the lady.

Displaying a broad smile of satisfaction, she came forward and knelt down and put her head on the saint's feet. The saint blessed her placing her palm on her head.

"Do you have something to tell me, my daughter?" asked Tulsidas.

"Nothing much, Baba, only ...."

She looked to her left and right and became sure that nobody was close enough to them to hear her.

"Mahatma, do you see anything wonderful on my face?" asked she.

"Your face itself is wonderful, my daughter, like the face of any innocent child of the Divine!" was the saint's response.

"I mean, don't you see something conspicuous on my face, something specially wonderful, this new nose-ring, for instance?,'

"I see it, my child, and it is really fine," said the saint. With his vast experience of mice and men, he understood that the girl had probably drawn the attention of everybody in the village to her newly acquired wealth and she desired the visitor also to appreciate it.

"It is fine, isn't it?" she said, blushing. "You see, Mahatma, my husband bought it yesterday—paying a heavy price. Was it necessary for him to be so extragavant on my account? But, as you so rightly said, it is nice—rather wonderful—isn't it so?"

"It's so, my child," said the saint. "And I'm glad that you feel grateful to your husband for giving you such a precious decoration for your nose. But, my child, have you ever felt grateful to the one who gave you the nose? Hence forth, my sweet, sweet daughter, you must learn to feel that," said the saint as he blessed her.

Gratitude to the Divine for all we receive is a Yajna and a very sure way to get closer to Him. The saint in this story has been able to use an ordinary occasion to turn one's attention towards the truth.

A Suernatural Achievement

Ram and Jiwan were brothers. Ram was humble and devoted to his parents. They were poor. That is why the boys could not go to the town for study. After they had learnt whatever they could at the village school, they were required to work for their livelihood. Ram took to his father's profession. That was to ferry travellers from one bank of the river to the other.

Ram wished Jiwan to assist him in the work. But Jiwan was ambitious. He was not interested in any manual work. But whenever there was any opportunity to attract other's attention, he did not let it slip by.

Such opportunities were rare in the village.

One day a man who called himself a Yogi visited the village. He had power to perform miracles. He hung his stick in the air itself—without the support of a hook or anything else to bear its weight. He could materialise a pinch of dust or even a stone. He was taken to be a holy man and the villagers flocked to him. Many touched his feet and many offered him food and money.

Jiwan was excited. Only if he could perform such astounding feats!

Without informing anybody, Jiwan left the village with the Yogi. Afterwards news reached his family that he and the Yogi were heading towards the Himalayas.

"Maybe he had lost all interest in the worldly affairs. He is looking for God," his father said.

"Maybe," agreed Jiwan's mother.

"Maybe," said Ram. "We should be happy if he achieves enlightenment."

Years passed—twenty years. Ram's parents were no more. One morning he heard that the Zamindar had a rare guest, a Yogi. He had even disclosed his identity. He was none other than Jiwan!

Jiwan now wore long loose garmets and had a beard too. He spoke few words and spoke quite proudly. He had promised to perform a great miracle.

Ram rushed to the Zamindar's house to meet his younger brother. There sat Jiwan—on a throne-like seat. Only the Zamindar occupied another chair. All the others sat on the floor. Some people went forward and touched Jiwan's feet.

Ram did not know whether or not to bow to the holy man. He stood, looking agape at the celebrity incarnation of his old familiar younger brother.

Jiwan gave him a nod of recognition; that was all.

Jiwan stood up. The Zamindar and the others followed suit.

"Let us proceed to the river-bank. I will show you my powers there!" announced Jiwan. The crowd, led by the Zamindar, followed him, agog with excitement.

The river was two miles away. The procession reached there braving a very hot sun. Then everybody's attention went over to Jiwan, the holy man. They were expecting the promised great miracle.

But Jiwan looked pale. "Where is water?" he asked.

It was the peak of summer and the river had temporarily dried up, except for patches of toe-deep water here and there.

"What for do you need water?" asked the Zamindar.

"I could have shown my miracle. I could have crossed the river walking over the stream!" said Jiwan haltingly. "We are not interested in what you could have done. Can you do

anything now?" asked the Zamindar who was beginning to regret walking two miles, panting and sweating.

Jiwan kept quiet.

"Enough!" said the Zamindar rather impatiently. He turned and talked without even asking his guest, Jiwan, to follow him. The crowd dispersed, not without making several sarcastic comments on Jiwan.

"Come home," Ram told Jiwan. "Never mind what they say." Both the brothers began plodding through the dry river-bed.

"So, you devoted twenty years to learn to walk over the waters of a river! What more?" asked Ram after a while.

Jiwan made no answer. It was clear that he had not learnt anything else.

"My brother!" wondered Ram sadly, "Must one devote twenty years of one's life to do something which anybody can do by paying a paisa to the boatman? We were under the impression that you were out to realise God!"

Jiwan continued to be glum and silent.

"Never mind, my brother, we are well off now, with my two sons working in the fields. Relax for a few days and we will fix up some work for you," said Ram again.

Jiwan nodded assent.

▩▩ Yet another comment on the futility of *Siddhis* for sake of *Siddhis*. Anything supernatural is not spiritual, though we ordinarily tend to confuse between the two. ▩▩

The Propitious Hour

In a forest lived a Tantrik who was practising austerities for a long time. He would sit on a tiger-skin for hours performing many difficult rites and reciting hymns.

A poor man who used to explore the forest for some herbs on behalf of a physician saw him from time to time. "How long will you go on like this, holy one?" the poor man asked him one day.

"Till I achieve my *Siddhi,*" said the Tantrik.

"When will that be?"

"Well, if I can go on till the particular *Amavasya* night two months hence, at midnight I should be blessed with the vision of Mother Kali. She is certain to grant me the boon I shall ask of her," the Tantrik announced proudly. "Then you'll see how powerful I'll become!" he added, laughing.

The poor man marvelled at his patience and askesis.

Days passed. The *Amavasya* came. It so happened that the poor man was in the forest for herbs. He remembered that the Tantrik was to achieve his *Siddhi* that very night. Curiosity got the better of him. He climbed a tree near the Tantrik's hut and waited.

The Tantrik sat in meditation. The midnight was approaching.

Suddenly a tiger roared behind the hut. The Tantrik stood up in panic. A second roar and he took to his heels.

The tiger fell silent. The poor man could hear its footfalls on the dry leaves. It moved away.

The midnight was only minutes away. Under a strange inspiration the poor man climbed down and occupied the seat deserted by the Tantrik. He closed his eyes and prayed to Mother Kali.

A wondrous light pierced through his eyelids. He opened his eyes and saw the vision of Mother Kali. He was too overwhelmed to speak. However, the compassionate smile of the Goddess emboldened him. He prostrated himself at Her feet.

"What boon do you wish to have?" asked the Goddess.

"Grant me the boon that will help me realise God."

"Granted," said Mother Kali.

"Mother, I'm only a poor man occasionally visiting the forest for a livelihood. I have done no askesis, performed no rites. I have rarely prayed to you. How is it that I reaped the harvest that was the outcome of the Tantrik's long labour?" asked the man.

"How much do you know of yourself? You don't remember the ardent aspiration and intense prayer with which you had sought me in your previous life! The boon you sought is granted."

The vision then disappeared.

Who has Renounced Wealth and Happiness?

The proud Maharaja was at last out on a pilgrimage. Not that he felt any sudden yearning for God but he decided it was high time he earned some religious merit after having accumulated a fat lot of wealth and having enjoyed power for long.

Late one afternoon he camped in a village close to a forest. He heard that in that forest lived a holy man for whom the local people had great respect. What was intriguing, the holy man was once a prince who had renounced his position and become a sage.

The Maharaja had nothing to do for a few hours. Curiosity led him into the forest. His dewan ran ahead of him and notified the sage of his Highness's approach.

The sage stood in front of his hut to welcome the Maharaja. The Maharaja was pleased. He bowed down and was about to touch the sage's feet.

The sage took a step back. "Please stop!" he said. The Maharaja, who was only being formal, was quite pleased to stop.

"Why do you wish to touch my feet?" asked the sage.

The Maharaja, who was not in the habit of answering questions, hesitated for a few seconds and said, "Holy Man, I bow down to you for the great sacrifices you have made—of wealth and happiness. You've renounced everything!"

The sage smiled. "In that case, Your Highness, I should bow down to you!" he said.

The Maharaja felt quite flattered. He had no doubt donated for a temple and had done some charities. Probably the sage was referring to such philanthropy of his !

However, for the sake of modesty, he said, "Why, Holy Man, what have I done that you should bow down to me?"

"I will tell you what you've renounced, but not before all your companions. Do you mind coming into my hut?"

The Maharaja, happy and curious, followed the sage into his hut.

But, looking at the sage, his face paled. The sage was grave to a degree that frightened him.

"Maharaja, two persons have two nice rooms. Inside the rooms there are gold and diamond scattered amidst filth. One throws the filth off his room and retains the gold and diamond. The other throws the gold and diamond off his room and retains the filth. Who had made a sacrifice?" asked the sage.

"The one who has thrown the gold and diamond and retained the filth," replied the Maharaja.

"Now, you fool, do you realise who between us has renounced? You have thrown away the wealth of spiritual bliss for sake of the filth that is your vanity, wealth and power. I have thrown away the filth to retain the true wealth and true happiness. Must you say that I have renounced? Is it not you who had renounced?"

His Highness hobbled out of the hut speechless.

Feats Human and Otherwise

There was a young man, the scion of a noble family, who was deeply interested in spiritual lores. He was humble and courteous to all who were known to be seekers of truth.

One day a 'holy man' met him. "Dear young man," said he, "it is time you had a guru. That will lead you along the right path. I can assure you that I have achieved enough to be your guide. If you so wish, I can give demonstration of my merits."

"Can you? What kind of demonstrations are they, Sir?" asked the curious young man.

"I can remain buried under the earth for days together; I can live under the water too for days at a stretch and, for your confidential information, I can even fly! I have achieved such feats through strenuous practice of Yogic and Tantric principles for years!" stated the holy man.

"Your achievements are impressive. But there are many others I know who can perform these feats. They are right here. Why not I accept them as my guru?" asked the young man.

The holy man looked surprised and a bit agitated. "I challenge you to show them to me!" he shouted.

"Come on, Sir," said the young man quietly. He led the holy man into his garden.

He dug a little into the earth and showed a worm. "Look here, Sir, this can remain under the earth for years, what to

speak of days!" Drawing the holy man's attention to his pond, he said? "Look at those fish and that tortoise over there. They can remain under the water all their life." Then pointing at a bird, he said, "Here is the one who can perform the other feat; it can fly!"

The holy man stood flabbergasted.

"Sir, what I need is to feel closer to God. That is the only feat I care for. I have no need for powers which creatures inferior to man possess!" explained the young man.

The 'holy man' knelt down before him and said, "I have met my guru!"

⊠ ⊠ Mistaking *Siddhis* for spirituality is a widely prevalent confusion. This is one of the several satires, a mild one, on that kind of ignorance. ⊠ ⊠

The Ascetic and the Angler

A traveller saw a man angling near a lake. Nearer him, he asked, "Gentleman, will you kindly tell me which is the way to Bhimpur?"

The angler, far from replying, did not even look at the traveller.

"Gentleman, did you hear me? Which is the way to Bhimpur? I am a stranger to the land," the traveller said once again, after waiting for while.

Even then the angler made no reply. Disgusted, the traveller moved away, cursing the man. But tired as he was, he sat down on a slab of a stone a few yards away.

After five minutes he saw a young ascetic approaching the angler.

"Sir, which is the way to Bhimpur?'' the ascetic asked the angler.

The traveller pricked his ears to hear what the angler would say so that he too could benefit by the answer.

But the angler paid no heed to the ascetic either. The ascetic repeated his question, but to no avail.

The traveller was sure that the ascetic would grow angry and curse the rude angler. But nothing like that happened. To his great surprise the traveller saw the ascetic prostrating himself to the angler and then quietly resuming his journey.

His spell of surprise over, the traveller ran to catch up with the ascetic.

"Holy man, will you please reveal to me the reason for your showing such respect to that angler? Wasn't he extremely discourteous?"

"Please don't speak ill of my guru!" replied the ascetic. "Guru? Is that angler your guru?' asked the traveller, utterly puzzled.

"It's so. He taught me concentration. Didn't you see how he remained totally undisturbed by my question? Not only his look, but also his mind was concentrated on his goal alone. I wish, I could concentrate on God in the same manner!" explained the ascetic.

This story is similar to the series of lessons Avadhut, a mystic character, receives from different sources, human and otherwise, establishing the fact that for a spiritual aspirant every experience has a creative value.

The True Miracle

It was late one evening. A merchant locked the doors of his shop and turned to go home, holding in his hand a small canvas bag containing the days's collection.

Suddenly a young man sprang up before him and snatched his bag and ran away.

The merchant as well as some passers-by gave a chase to the thief. He ran zigzag, but was caught before long.

He was dragged to the Kotwal or the Police Chief.

At once the young man caught hold of the Kotwal's feet and pleaded for pardon.

But the haughty officer gave him a hard kick. He was flung away. And he decided not to let the opportunity slip by. He jumped and ran.

He was given a hot chase by the Kotwal's sepoys. By then it was quite dark. He changed his direction several times, successfully evading his pursuers.

He soon left the town behind and headed towards a forest. But before he could enter the forest, he heard the sound of heavy footsteps behind him. On one side of the road was a small hill. A ray of light from a cave fell on the road. The young man tried his best to reach it, but exhausted, he fell and fainted. The sepoys passed by his sprawling body, taking no notice of it.

The hermit who lived in the cave carried the young man into his shelter and nursed him. He regained sense.

"I pray, kindly allow me to stay with you and serve you," said the young man. He thought that would be safe for him

because the sepoys would not ordinarily harass a hermit or his disciple.

The kind-hearted hermit accepted him as his disciple. The young man became a true devotee. The hermit taught him Yoga and meditation and gave him wisdom. In due course he grew enlightened.

The hermit passed away after some years. But the disciple, who had become well known as a hermit himself, continued to live there. He was widely respected.

One day, at the request of some of his disciples, he visited the town. A number of people came to meet him. They asked him several questions and he satisfied them with his simple answers.

A very old man, who sat listening to the hermit's discourse, at last bowed to him and said, "O Sage, it'll be a miracle if I can come anywhere near God. I've lived a rather crude life. I was the Kotwal of this town."

"Miracles do take place, my friend! One day, I had to touch your feet. Today you touch my feet! Isn't this verily a miracle? If a thief could be in God's mercy, why can't a thief-catcher?" asked the hermit, laughing.

The old man sat puzzled. But the hermit did not hesitate to narrate to him the incident that had made him a hermit.

The old Kotwal hugged the hermit's feet again and wept.

⊠⊠ It is said that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. Indian mysticism asserts the doctrine that a vast range of possibilities mark the life of a man. ⊠⊠

Mysteries Human and Divine

The younger prince was quite humble, but he proved extremely adamantine in his decision to go to the Himalayas for Yoga.

"I must understand the mystery of God and then shall be back and help my brother in ruling the kingdom," he told the prime minister who was doing his best to dissuade the prince from the course he was about to take.

"There are enough mysteries around us, O Prince, to keep you engaged. You need not go over to the Himalayas for God's mysteries," said the prime minister who hardly understood what the prince meant. And, to prove his point, he ushered in a wizard to the prince's presence the next day.

The wizard was extraordinarily skilled in his art. He requested the prince to look after his wife while he proceeded to the sky to participate in a battle going on between the Devas and the Asuras. He chanted some hymns over a bundle of rope. The rope straightened up—and rose higher and higher. The wizard climbed it and disappeared through the clouds.

Next, the astonished prince and a hundred or so people who were present there heard several shrieks and sounds coming from the other side of the clouds.

Suddenly the wizard was seen falling headlong and alas! he fell before them, dead.

His wife wailed alone. "O my dear husband! How did you get killed while fighting against the Asuras !" she cried out and proposed to sacrifice herself in her husband's funeral pyre.

All were sad and many tried to dissuade her from her proposed action, but in vain. There was nothing more to be done about it. The pyre was prepared. The wizard's body was placed on it and his living wife lay beside the body. The pyre was then lighted.

Suddenly, shouting a lusty cheer of triumph the wizard jumped from above and appeared before the prince. "I made my contribution to the battle and am back. Thank you for looking after my wife. May you be pleased to hand her over to me now," he said.

The prince did not say anything, but the nobles present there fumbled. They told him apologetically how they believed him dead and how his wife insisted on going up in flames along with what was supposed to be his dead body!

"How could my wife have gone up in flames if I am still alive?" asked the wizard and he called her by her name. The lady came rushing out of the palace!

"So, gentlemen, you had kept my wife in hiding and told me that she burnt herself alive!" said the wizard feigning anger, looking at the nobles.

The nobles stood stunned.

"Do you now understand, O noble Prince, So many mysteries can be performed by human beings! It is absolutely unnecessary for you to go after God's mysteries!" commented the prime minister.

"Indeed, if a mere human being can create such mysteries, how great would be the wizardry of God!" murmured the prince in a manner of a soliloquy and, looking at the wizard, asked, "Will you reveal your secrets to anybody in this audience?"

"How can I do that, O noble Prince?"

"Will you teach your secrets to your son?"

"That I will, O noble Prince!" said the wizard.

Looking at the prime minister, the prince spoke with a gesture of finality, "So, I must prove myself a son of God to know His mysteries. Goodbye!"

The Scholar Remembers His Native Dialect

Nobody in the village Kamalkund had ever been to any school—and to finish a course in scriptures at Varanasi was beyond their wildest dreams.

But that is what the young Jivanendra had done. He belonged to a neighbouring village and he was coming to Kamalkund to visit his maternal uncles.

Many were eager to meet the scholar fresh from Varanasi. It was the weekly market day and, while selling and buying of grocery, vegetables, pottery, sweets, etc. were going on in full swing, those who knew about Jivanendra's impending visit were looking towards the road again and again.

At last, Jivanendra was seen approaching the village a little before the sunset. He wore a creamy silk dhoti and a long shirt of dazzling orange colour. His well-cut beard matched his hair-style. He looked more like a bridegroom than a scholar.

With a benign smile he blessed those who bowed to him, placing his right palm on their heads. At the same time he muttered some Sanskrit hymns which nobody understood but everybody appreciated because the feat spoke of his learning. To meet a learned man or to be familiar with him or to exchange a few words with him was an opportunity, after all.

But those simple folks did not know what to do when he began speaking to them, for he spoke in Sanskrit. His

listeners looked agape. After a while one of them made bold to remind him that he was speaking to an illiterate lot and that he should be kind enough to speak the language which they understood.

He nodded condescendingly and spoke in their language—but such high flown was it that again his words fell on deaf ears. However, they could make out this much:

having lived amidst great pundits for long five years he found it difficult to speak like an ordinary man.

Some people in the audience were beginning to grow sceptic. Was a period of five years enough to make one forget the language or dialect of his nativity?

A few yards away from the spot where the young scholar stood, some people were enjoying a fight between two rams. Suddenly, one of the fighting rams was attracted towards the scholar. Probably his dazzling robe provoked it to challenge him instead of the other ram, for a change.

It headed towards him and, taking position in front of him, lowered its head, preparing to charge at him.

But the young scholar, accustomed to bless any head that bowed to him, raised his right hand as a necessary gesture. Even though some anxious voices cautioned him to move aside, he did not pay heed to them and the next moment the ram gave him a lusty whack.

Falling flat, the scholar now instantly started to abuse the animal in a dialect that everyday understood without the least difficulty. By the time he stood up and grew conscious that he had deviated from his form, it was too late.

"We are sorry that the naughty ram did not know how to behave with you, but we are also happy that you have not forgotten your native tongue altogether," commented a witty man with a twinkle in his eyes.

⊠⊠ The treatment which the scholar received from the ram does not reduce the importance of his scholarship, but hints at the inexplicable law that there is a reaction for one's action at its own plane. The scholar's vanity and his disregard for the sensibility of the people to whom he was talking belonged to a plane not quite different from the plane at which the ram acted! ⊠⊠

The Swan from Manasarovar

A luminous swan, a resident of the great and sacred lake Manasarovar high in the Himalayas, once grew curious about the localities beyond that divine ranges of hills.

One day he spread its silver wings and rose above the peaks and flew down towards the villages and hamlets of the plains.

He flew for hours and then, locating a pond at the middle of a village, descended there.

As he relaxed touching the muddy water and surveying the environment with curiosity, the storks who were wallowing in the mud scanned him with amazement.

"Who are you, stranger ?" one of the older storks asked him.

"I am a swan."

"Swan? We understand. We have heard of swans. Where do you live?"

"The heavenly Manasarovar is my abode."

"Where is that?"

"In the inner ranges of the god-souled Himalayas, overlooked by the Mount Kailash."

"Is that lake different from this our pond in any way?" asked another stork.

"Well, very, very different, I must say!"

"In what way? How much do you know about this wonderful pond of ours? At least a dozen cows and buffaloes

bathe in this, apart from a dozen or two men, women and kids. Can your lake break this record?" asked a young stork aggressively.

"No cows, buffaloes, men, women and kids live around our lake. But nymphs and fairies, gandharvas and kinnaras, apart from gods and goddesses come to bathe there," replied the swan.

"Do you have such water-creepers as we have sporting such tiny flowers?"

"No. But we have lotuses radiating a golden hue."

"What do you eat?"

"The lotus-fruit and lotus-nectar."

The storks looked at one another meaningfully.

"Do you mean to say that you live without eating insects, leeches, froglings, worms and fish?"

"What are they?" asked the swan.

"What are they? You ask what are they? That means you have never even tasted them and you still consider your life worth-living?" asked several of the storks in chorus and then all of them burst into a shrill, screeching laughter.

The swan from the Manasarovar took off and spread his wings heading towards his Himalayan abode.

The plight of the culturally and aesthetically superior before the crude—more so if the later collectively confronts the former, is well known. The story points at the failure of the lower consciousness, a prisoner of its ego and ignorance, to understand the higher—and it laughs at what it does not understand.

This story is told through an *Udbhata*—Sanskrit verses at once witty and epigrammatic.

The Mighty Elephant and the Tiny Fish

A wealthy merchant often visited Haridwar where his guru lived. He loved to listen to his guru's discourse, even though he failed to appreciate all the concepts and ideas the sage presented.

For instance, he could not understand why his guru lay great emphasis on the need for surrender. He appreciated the value of action; it was through hard work that he had grown wealthy. He understood the value of prudence; his grasp over the world of commerce was unerring. He bought and sold things always to his profit. He also understood how important love and trust were. He was happy because these were the values which ruled the relationship between himself and the members of his family—his wife and children.

But of what value is surrender?

One day it rained heavily. Never in the near past had the holy Haridwar experienced that kind of rain.

Suddenly the guru caught hold of the merchant and dragged him to the shore of the Ganges. Turbulent and mightily forceful was the flow and the noise it made was fearful. Huge boulders, big trees and several animals were being carried away by the current, under a threatening sky heavy with dark clouds and dazzling with frequent lightning.

The guru pointed his finger in a certain direction. The merchant was amazed to see a colossal elephant battling against the violent current, but was losing the battle. The

mighty creature of the wilderness was totally helpless, the sound of its trumpet suppressed by cracks of thunder.

It disappeared as they looked on.

Next the guru pointed his finger at the stream close to the shore.

There a tiny fish swam against the current with ease and a total abandon.

Said the guru:

Jo jisko sharan lije

So rakhe tako laj

Ulat jal machchli chale

Bahjay gajraj!

(He who is surrendered to Him, is protected by Him:

The tiny fish tan swim against the current while the monarch of the forest is swept away by it.)

The merchant bowed to the guru and both returned to their abode.

⊠⊠ The theme of a total surrender to the Divine runs through a wide range of mystic lore, from the great scripture the Gita, to an anecdote like this one, told by Swami Brahmananda who lived on the banks of the Narmada. The story was obtained by the author through the courtesy of Shri Champak Chatterjee. ⊠⊠

The Final Choice

The little mouse was almost dead when the sage's wife rescued it from their cat.

"O poor creature!" muttered the lady while trying to revive it. "I saved you today but who can tell about tomorrow? I wish I had the power to change you into a human being!"

"There is a hymn by which it can be done—and the hymn works only at a rare moment of conjunction among stars which occurs once in a thousand years. For your information, that moment is fast approaching," said the sage.

"For heaven's sake, let's not let the moment slip away! Change this one into a human child."

"That will protect it from cats and other dangers. But will that really help it?" wondered the sage.

"What do you mean? demanded the lady.

"As you know, it takes many lives for a spirit—many incarnations as different creatures—to be born as a human being ultimately. Will it be proper to change it into a human child straightaway? What about its consciousness ?"

"I don't understand your philosophy. Here is a rare moment when you can do a miracle and you know the hymn by which that can be done. I will also love to have a child to care for. Why don't you make the right use of the occasion?" demanded the lady.

"Well, well, right use or wrong, I'll do as you say!"

The sage recited the hymn as soon as the rare moment arrived and sprinkled a little water on the mouse. Lo and behold! it turned into an infant girl.

The sage was amused; his wife was thrilled.

Years passed and the girl grew up into a beautiful maiden. Many young men of the village desired to marry her. But she

told her father and mother that she will marry only the greatest of all the bridegrooms.

"Will she agree to marry the sun?" the sage asked his wife and she put the question to the girl.

"Not a bad choice, unless there is someone greater than him!" the girl observed.

"We may call the cloud greater than the sun, for he alone can deprive him of his shine!" said the sage.

"Cloud is fine, unless there is someone greater than him!" said the girl.

"Well, greater than the cloud is the wind, for it can drive the cloud away!" said the sage.

"He is fine, unless there is someone greater than him!" was the girl's sonorous observation.

"Greater than the wind is the mountain, for the wind can never disturb it!"

"Mountain is fine, unless, of course, there is someone greater than him!"

"Greater than the mountain, of course, is the mouse, for he alone can bore a tunnel through it! — and there he goes!" the sage said pointing at a rat.

The would-be bride blushed and hid her face under her foster mother's saree. She was most willing to embrace the proposal.

The sage summoned the rat - and at once the girl changed into a rat - her love for her would-be bridegroom bringing about that miracle!

The couple left for their abode.

"Do you now realise that what I said the other day was not mere philosophy?" the sage told his wife.

Change of form and style, however pompous and however elegant, does not ultimately lead one anywhere as long as the consciousness remains unchanged. Numerous anecdotes and witty couplets floated by the wise are pointers at this truth.

The Jackal's Magic

A father and a son, travellers along a long winding road, took rest under a big banyan tree.

The son was playing with a dazzling coin. "My son, don't lose it!" the father exhorted the little boy.

"Why, Father? Is it very precious?" asked the son.

"Of course, my son, it is money, the most precious thing so far as your worldly life is concerned!" replied the father.

"How so, Father?" the son persisted in his query.

"My son! if you have money, you can do almost anything you wish to do. You can conquer a kingdom, build a castle, eat anything you like, command men, horses and elephants ...." said the father.

A young jackal who sat hiding in the hollow of the tree heard the dialogue between the father and the son. He was amazed.

The boy dozed off and the coin slipped from his hand. After half an hour the two resumed their journey. Both had forgotten about the coin.

The little jackal came out of his hiding and found the coin. He hid it and then jumped and danced merrily and was in no mood to stop.

"What's the matter, Master Jackal? It seems you have conquered a kingdom!" observed a mongoose.

"I have not yet conquered one, but can do so any moment. I have the secret by which I can conquer a kingdom, build a castle, eat anything I like, command men, horses, elephants!" announced the jubilant jackal.

The mongoose thought it rather strange, but he could not dismiss the jackal's claim as nonsense. No jackal would jump like that unless he had really achieved something fantastic.

The mongoose ran and gave the news to a deer. The deer told about it to a boar. Several other animals and birds heard about it. They made a beeline to see the jackal.

The jackal had grown so proud that he greeted none. "I have the magic by which I can win a kingdom, build a castle, eat anything I like, command men, horses and elephants!" he announced again and again.

" Enough, little one, will you please prove what you say? There comes an elephant. Can you command it to stop?" asked an old bear.

"Ha. ha! Ha ha!!" laughed the jackal. "I will show you what I can do! What is a mere elephant before me?"

The jackal took position on a spot, ready to confront the elephant.

The huge creature came closer. At some distance the animals waited with bated breath to see the miracle the little jackal was so sure of performing.

The jackal sat on his hind legs and managed to lift the coin with his forepaws. "Listen to me, you elephant! Look, look what I possess. This is money, do you understand? Yes, this is genuine money. Now I command you to stop!" he said as loudly as possible.

The elephant did not pay attention to his command. He strode on. The jackal shouted at the peak of his voice, but in vain. The elephant at last noticed him and took hold of him by his trunk and threw him on a thorny bush. The jackal was hurt. It limped as it tried to run away. The coin had gone.

The animals took pity on the jackal, but at the same time they could not help laughing.

"The chap must have got that shining stuff from some silly human being. I know that there are fools among men who believe that the thing called money can fetch them anything," said a monkey who sat on the banyan tree. "But I can tell

you that a kingdom won can be lost. No money can save it. A castle built can be destroyed by men or Nature, no money can save it. A man can suffer from a disease and lose his capacity for eating, no money can help him. One can command men and horses and elephants, but if they decide not to be commanded, no money can help one!"

The animals thanked the monkey and dispersed.

In Search of Fire

It was a winter night. The chowkidar had already made two rounds of the village, shouting "*Husiar*!" (Alert!) Not that he was that alert every night, but occasionally he had to sacrifice his sleep when the zamindar camped at his *kachahri*.

He had a *kalke*, a handy earthen pipe through which one smoked. He filled it with tobacco, but he must light it whereas he had no match-box with him.

He called out to the inmate of a hut. An old lady opened the bamboo door.

"Can I have a small ember from your oven, Granny?" he asked.

"My son, my oven has not been lighted for days. I am given a meal a day at the zamindar's *kachahri*. At night I manage with a handful of *prasad* the temple priest gives me. I rarely cook. How can I have embers in my oven?" said the woman.

The chowkidar moved on to the next house. "Would you lend me your match-box?" he asked the man who came out at his call.

"But we don't have any! We had lighted a twig at the neighbour's kitchen for our cooking purpose. Once all had their food and the day's chores were over, my wife sprinkled water on the oven to extinguish the fire!" regretfully said the man. "Try at the next house."

At the next house, it seemed all had fallen asleep and nobody responded to the Chowkidar's call.

'The best thing will be to go to the *kachahri.* The zamindar's staff would still be awake and if chips are still not burning in the oven, someone would surely have a matchbox,' he thought and reached the *kachahri,* shouting out his *Husiar* more frequently to impress the zamindar's officials with his alertness.

"Hello our dear Chowkidar! You're watchful indeed!" commented the zamindar's manager who still sat in an armchair in the veranda, talking to the clerk.

"I'm only your humble servant, *hazoor,* doing my duty in a humble way!" said the Chowkidar, keeping down his lathi and the lantern on the floor and bowing to the manager.

"Good. But what brings you here now? Do you wish to lie down for a while?"

The Chowkidar stretched his tongue. "How can I do such a thing, Sir? Do I ever lie down at night? Am I not always on my blessed legs guarding the village?" he said feigning gravity. "I came only to find a little fire to light my *kalke,*" he added.

"For fire to light your *kalke,* Chowkidar? Why, what about the lantern you are carrying?" asked the manager. "Is the flame burning inside it an illusion?"

The chowkidar stretched his tongue once again— waking up to the horror of his own ignorance.

"O God, O my accursed wit! It never struck me that I was carrying fire myself," he grumbled against himself as the manager and the others laughed.

⊠⊠ What we search outside ourselves is already within ourselves—call it God or the Truth or the Soul. Ignorance that shrouds us does not let us find it. A shorter version of the story is there among the parables of Sri Ramakrishna. ⊠⊠

A Most Delicious Drink

There was excitement in the town, people talking of a young sage who not only dared to argue with great scholars of the king's court but also succeeded in silencing them. He spoke on difficult issues of philosophy with extraordinary fluency and force.

There was a young man who was very ambitious. He went to see the sage. What impressed him more than the sage's wisdom was the admiration he received from his audience.

The young man approached the sage's host. "I shall be very happy to attend upon the sage on your behalf," he said. The host found nothing amiss in the offer.

The young man lived with the sage fetched food for him from his host's kitchen, cleaned his utensils and dried his clothes and did sundry works.

Soon it was marked that he had begun dressing like the sage, putting on the kind of clothes the sage used and the way he used. His gait and postures too became a successful imitation of the sage's.

The sage used to often utter, *Sivoham!* which meant, "I am Siva". He said so when through his absolute devotion for Siva, he became identified with the Lord.

It was doubtful whether the young man even knew the meaning of the phrase, but he started saying *Sivoham* whenever he saw some people. He acted in a way as if there was hardly any difference between the sage and himself!

A week later the sage was on his way to a village in the suburb of the town. The young man was among those who accompanied him.

While walking, the sage told a follower, "Sometimes I feel I am non-existent."

"Do you feel so, Sir? I also feel the same quite often," said the young man promptly.

"At other times I feel one with Siva!" said the sage. "Lord Siva had swallowed the terrible poison that emerged from the ocean during its churning by the Devas and the Asuras. I feel I can also swallow something like that with His Grace."

"Sir, I too feel the same," said the young man, sure that he had impressed all those who followed the sage.

The sage suddenly sat down before the hut of a blacksmith. "I'm thirsty," he said. But he did not ask for water. There was molten iron in a pot. He lifted the pot and drank half of its content. Then he held out the pot to the young man. "You too would probably relish this!" he said.

The young man trembled in awe and wonder. He fell at the sage's feet. The sage smiled with compassion and patted him on the back.

The young man continued to follow him, but never did he show any inclination to imitate him in future.

This miracle of drinking the molten iron is attributed to Shankaracharya in some versions of the story, the theme of which is meant to snub the pretentious and the hypocrite.

How Long to Wait?

The sky was glowing with the rays of the setting sun. Through the clouds descended Narada, the great sage, who often wandered between heaven and earth.

Playing his *veena* and singing the hymns to Lord Vishnu, Narada set foot on the peak of a mountain. Then joyfully he began climbing down the mountain, enjoying the fragrance of the wild flowers and the sound of the murmuring brook parallel to his path.

"O Narada! Blessed be you. Will you please stop a while and listen to my prayer?" was the voice that greeted Narada.

Narada stopped and looked back. His eyes met the eager eyes of a Yogi who emerged from a cave.

"What is your request, O worthy Yogi?" asked Narada.

"Do you consider me worthy? Thank you. My question is, when should God consider me worthy of meeting Him? And my prayer to you is to put this question to Him and bring His answer to me when you descend on the earth next."

"I will do so," said Narada.

"God ought to know everything, but kindly do not forget to remind Him that I have practised severe askesis for years; I have achieved many a power. It was high time that I met Him!" pleaded the Yogi.

I'll convey your prayer to Him," assured Narada.

He then resumed playing the *veena* and singing and walking downward. At the foot of the hill was a lake. By its

side, in a small hut, lived a devotee of Vishnu. He came out of his hut when he saw Narada and prostrated to him. "O Narada," he said, "will you kindly ask my Lord when will He allow me to set my eyes on His lotus feet?"

"I will," said Narada as he moved away.

A year passed. Narada happened to visit the earth again. As he descended on the mountain, playing his *veena* and singing as usual, the yogi saw him and rushing out of his cave, informed him "O Narada, in the meantime I have achieved still more powers through my askesis."

"Congratulations!" said Narada.

"Now, do tell me, how long must wait in order to be admitted to Vishnu's presence?"

"Not very long," answered Narada. "You have to pass through five more births and in your sixth life from now you will have great spiritual realisations. Thereafter you will meet Vishnu."

"What?" exclaimed the yogi, "Still six more births? What for did I undergo all the strenuous and severe practices in this life then? All is dark, all is lost for me!"

"Have patience," said Narada, but it is difficult to say whether the Yogi heard him, lost that he was in his remorse.

Narada climbed down the mountain, leaving the disappointed Yogi behind. At the foot of the mountain the devotee rushed out of his hut at the sound of the heavenly music and threw himself on the ground before Narada.

"My friend, I put your question duly to the Lord," informed Narada.

"Did you? It is so kind of you. And what was my Lord's reply?" asked the devotee with bated breath.

"Well, He said that you must undergo a thousand more births in order to be with Him," said Narada.

"What! Only a thousand more births and I am there with my Lord! Glory to Thee, O Lord! Infinite indeed is Thy

Grace! How do I express my gratitude to you, O Narada, for giving me this wonderful news? Tell my Lord, O Narada, that I do not deserve to see Him even after a hundred thousand, nay, a thousand thousand births! It is only in His supreme compassion that He has decided to grant me shelter at his lotus feet after only a thousand more births! Oh, how delighted, how thrilled I am!"

"Enough," said Narada with a meaningful smile. "Follow me. It is high time you are gathered to His presence. He is waiting for you."

Thus Narada led the devotee to Vaikuntha, the abode of Lord Vishnu.

⊠⊠ 'Yogi', in this story, is used in a limited sense—a man who is happy with achieving supernatural powers, though he has set meeting God as his ultimate goal. Between such seekers who undertake severe penances and those who simply love the Lord with all their emotions and passions and their soul's yearning, the latter have a greater claim to the Lord's affection—it is believed. ⊠⊠

The Indefatigable Bondage

The guru had many disciples but two of them, both young, lived with him as his personal attendants. They were Nilkanth and Vishal. Both served the guru well and the guru taught both of them the value of a life devoted to spiritual pursuits.

Nilkanth was intelligent, wise and strong enough to purse his goal without any deviation. But Vishal, though extremely good-natured, was weak in mind, easily lured by dubious values.

Before his death the guru told Nilkanth, "I am confident of your future, but about Vishal, I'm not sure. Maybe, he would like to experience a worldly life. If he expresses any such desire, do not discourage him. Everyone has his own peculiar path to traverse. But I exhort you not to let him get lost totally. Keep an eye on him even when he is far from you. And, when he has experienced the ordinary life sufficiently, drag him out of it. Be stern; otherwise all that he has learnt and whatever he has achieved, would go in vain."

The guru passed away. Disciples from far and near gathered to perform his funeral rites and it was Nilkanth, as desired by the guru before he breathed his last, who was recognised as his successor.

Among those who had come to attend the funeral was Vishal's father. "My son, your ailing mother is not likely to

live long. Better accompany me home and be with her for some days," he proposed to his son.

Vishal accompanied his father after assuring Nilkanth that he would be back in a month.

But, after a month, what Nilkanth received was the message that Vishal was getting married to fulfil his mother's last wish.

Ten years passed. Nilkanth remembered his guru's advice and paid a visit to Vishal's village. Vishal received him with great joy. He had grown quite prosperous as his large house and life-style indicated.

"My friend, what about your promise to return to the hermitage?" Nilkanth asked him, after a day, when nobody else was with them.

"Nilkanth, you are no longer a mere friend of mine, but my spiritual guardian. It is so kind of you to remind me of my life's true mission. But, you see, I have three children and all of them are mere toddlers. How can I desert them? Let them grow up and I will join you by all means," Vishal promised.

"Good. But do not forget your promise," warned Nilkanth and he went back to his hermitage.

Another twelve years passed. As there was no sign of Vishal coming back, Nilkanth paid another visit to his house. Vishal was delighted at the sight of his friend-cum-mentor. "What a joy it is to meet you amidst the vexing problems of an ordinary worldly life!" he exclaimed and, even before Nilkanth had asked him, said, "My eldest daughter is already married. I am looking for a suitable bride for my son and fitting match for my younger daughter. Once these two duties are over—oh—what a relief is awaiting me! I'll be with you without the least loss of time."

Nilkanth went back, not quite happy though.

Ten more years passed and the guru's instruction flashed in his memory very forcefully. He travelled to Vishal's house. Nobody recognised him, but a dog came rushing to him

wagging its tail vehemently and making all sorts of queer noises and licking his legs.

"You fool, get away!" shouted a man who was none other than Vishal's son, threatening to kick the dog.

"I am Vishal's *gurubhai*. Where is he?" Nilkanth asked.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to send the sad news to you. He is no more!" replied the man.

"O God!" Nilkanth almost screamed.

"But, Sir, be kind enough to be our guest. We will consider ourselves lucky," said Vishal's son.

Nilkanth passed the night, lying in bed on the verandah of the house. The dog refused to part from him and lay near his feet.

Through his meditation, Nilkanth was amused to learn that his friend had reincarnated as the dog. Nilkanth asked the dog to accompany him, but replied the dog, "The time is bad because of a famine. There are robbers on the prowl. Who will guard the house if I depart? I will be with you very soon—as soon as this bad period of time comes to an end."

Nilkanth returned to his hermitage the next day, feeling rather dejected.

He let five more years pass before once again making it to Vishal's—rather Vishal's son's house. He was received with respect and, on enquiry, came to know that the dog had died.

That night Nilkanth meditated deeply in order to find out what happened to Vishal's spirit. After a long time he heard a hissing emanating from one of the rooms. He concentrated on it and learnt that it was the sound made by a cobra and the cobra was the latest incarnation of Vishal's spirit. It rested under a huge wooden chest, the family treasury, and guarded it. Its consciousness by then had become so blurred that it could hardly recognise Nilkanth.

As soon as it was morning, Nilkanth called Vishal's son and told him, "There is a deadly cobra living under your treasure-chest. You ought to get rid of it."

Vishal's son lost no time in calling his neighbours who came armed with iron rods and lathis. They removed the chest and found a hole on the floor. They pumped boiling water into it. The moment the cobra came out of it, it was thrashed.

But Nilkanth stopped them in time for the snake's life to be spared. He then dragged it by the tail himself and put it in an earthen pot and carried it with him. With proper occult rites he released Nilkanth's spirit from it which was then to take a human birth and probably to resume his spiritual quest.

⊠⊠ Serious spiritual lore precludes the possibility of a human soul incarnating as a dog or a snake. But the unrefined ritual life element, marked by desires—unsatisfied desires in particular—can possess any inferior creature, any animal, for a certain period of time.

In any case, the thrust of the story is a pointer towards the blind attachment which ruins one's spiritual attainments, and the guru's Grace which saves—which in this case worked through Nilkanth. ⊠⊠

From Whom to Beg?

Women of the village had to walk no less than a mile in summer to fetch drinkable water from the river because their shallow ponds dried up or the meagre water left in them grew too unclean to be consumed.

Everybody suffered, but it seems nobody except Bholaji, a servant living in a road-side hut, gave any serious thought to finding any solution to the problem.

He had tried his best, he had run from pillar to post, but in vain. He had been back in his hut, deciding to change his strategy.

He had been there only for an hour, talking to a young disciple of his, when someone peeped in and asked, "Can you give us a little water to drink? We are dying of thirst."

Bholaji came out and saw a group of five travellers waiting under a tree with their camels. It was a merchant's party.

"I'll give you water to drink. But do you mind waiting a little?" asked Bholaji.

"We are too thirsty and too tired to do anything except waiting for water," replied the leader of the group. Bholaji went away.

In a little over half an hour Bholaji and his disciple were back on the spot, bringing two large jars filled with water. The merchant did not fail to observe that they were panting.

The travellers quenched their thirst and perched their tents on the meadow in front of Bholaji's hut. Evening set

in and they began cooking their food and requested Bholaji and his disciple to join them in their dinner.

While the cooking was going on, the merchant found out to his embarassment that Bholaji and his disciple had literally run to and fro the river to fetch water.

"Why don't you dig a well?" asked the merchant.

"Ours is a rocky area. We have to dig deep for water to surface. We need a good amount of money—at least fifty gold coins—to execute the project. But the villagers live from hand to mouth. Where can we find such a huge sum of money?" Bholaji asked and then proceeded to give an

account of his futile efforts in the direction of solving the problem.

He had been to meet the landlord. But he was aghast to find the old man bed-ridden with a prolonged ailment. The landlord knew Bholaji to be a saintly person. The moment his eyes fell on Bholaji, he said in a tone of supplication, "Holy man, it is so kind of you to have paid a visit to me. I am suffering with this cursed disease for the last one year and physicians from far and near have practically squeezed the last coin out of my purse. I beg of you a favour. Will you promise to grant it?"

Bholaji felt sad and amused at the same time. He had come to beg the landlord's favour. What favour was the landlord seeking of him?

"Be pleased to tell me, Sir, what I can do for you!" Bholaji muttered.

"Please pray to God so that His Grace takes me out of my predicament," said the landlord in a feeble voice.

Bholaji agreed to do so and, after speaking to the landlord some words of consolation, took leave of him.

Bholaji was left with no alternative than to walk all the way up to the capital to seek an appointment with the king. A courtier who respected him told him, "The best time for obtaining the king's favour is to make an appeal to him when he would come out of the shrine after offering his prayers to his deity. Generally he does not refuse anything to anybody at that auspicious moment."

The shrine at which the king prayed was inside the palace and nobody else was allowed to step into the sanctum sanctorum while the king was there. The resourceful courtier, however, arranged for Bholaji to stand outside the shrine, close to the entrance.

But while standing there, he heard the king praying in a murmur, "O Lord, you know very well how the neighbouring

king has been a continuous threat to my position. Unless I conquer and annex his kingdom for good, I cannot be at peace. Grant me victory, grant me strength and also grant me the wealth necessary to pass through the ordeal of a war!"

Bholaji quietly turned and crossed the gate of the shrine. The courtier who was waiting for him outside was surprised. "What happened? Why did you not wait for the king to come out?"

"I am not going to ask him for help."

"Why?"

"How can I beg of a beggar? He is himself begging for several things from God. Why should I not also ask God for what I want?" replied Bholaji. He returned to his village.

The merchant whom Bholaji narrated his chain of experiences heard him with rapt attention. He bowed to him and placed an amount of a hundred coins before him.

"Believe me, Sir, I had taken a vow of donate this much money for some noble cause if I succeeded in making a certain deal during this business trip of mine. I did succeed. I have no doubt in my mind that offering this to you would be the best fulfilment of my vow," said the merchant.

Both Bholaji and the merchant wiped their tears of gratitude.

▩▩ The version of the story, which is relatively more popular, ends with the savant's discovery that the king too is a beggar, and his quiet retreat.

While the story is a comment on the reality that everybody is a beggar in this world of endless desires, all fulfilments can come only from one source—though they may come through human agencies. ▩▩

A Fight against Fate

It was a festive night, for the king had been blessed with a son. The king and the queen had performed a number of rites and had observed several vows to obtain this boon, for they had remained without any issue for twelve years of their married life.

The queen was congratulated by all her near and dear ones. The bonny child lay beside her. At the approach of midnight all were asked to leave the queen's room so that she could have a restful sleep, guarded by her maids outside her room. The lamps were dimmed.

The queen slept for a while but, all of a sudden, she woke up. A strange light seemed to have appeared near her head. She strained her eyes to look at its source. What she saw stunned her. There stood a luminous being, his right hand spread towards her new-born son's head. As the queen saw him, the being withdrew his hand and smiled.

The queen sat up. "I don't know who you are, but you are surely a godly being. Please bless my son so that he becomes lucky," said the queen. The luminous being kept silent. That intrigued the queen. "Why don't you speak?" she demanded with great humility. "And wouldn't you be kind enough to identify yourself before the ignorant lady that I am?"

"I am the god of Fate. My only business is to write on the forehead of a new-born child what is in store for it in this

life. I cannot wish for a child anything more than what his Karma had ordained for it. I appear at the birth of every child, though people cannot see me. That you could see me, speaks of a certain occult quality you possess, even though you were not aware of it," said the god of Fate.

The queen bowed to the god. "Wouldn't you reveal to me what you wrote on my child's forehead?"

"I cannot do so. Even if I do, it will be of no use to you. On the other hand, it will unnecessarily cause you anxiety," said the god.

"You have told me almost half of what I wished to know. I guess, all is not well with my son's destiny. You must tell me the whole truth; otherwise I will not let you depart. If you go away forcibly, I will kill myself," said the queen in a voice tender but determined.

The dialogue between the queen and the god went on for some more time. At last the god was obliged to disclose to her that her son would live poor and far from the locality—in a forest!

The queen shed tears of despair, but managed to ask the god for some small boon that would at least alleviate her son's misery.

"Well," said the god, "I grand that he shall be able to catch a deer a day, enough to maintain himself and yourself in a humble way. This now becomes a part of his fate. I cannot do anything beyond that."

And then the god took leave of the queen.

Days passed. The queen kept her anguish and anxiety to herself. A year later the king fell ill and died. The minister, a wicked plotter, usurped the throne under the pretext that the prince was a child and secretly tried to kill the queen and the prince. On time the queen, along with her child, escaped into a forest.

It was awfully hard for the queen to adjust herself to a havenot's life. But the god of Fate's assurance proved true. Every evening the queen spread a few nets in different parts of the forest. In the morning it was found that a deer had fallen into one of them. She handed over the catch to a forest-dweller who sold it in the town and gave the queen her due.

This went on for years. Soon the toddler prince began helping his mother. When he was twelve, he took up the entire work on himself. Meanwhile, he became a hermit's student and learnt reading and writing. He proved intelligent and was bursting with ideas. He was endowed with a spirit of adventure.

"It is rather strange that I catch never more than one deer although I spread nets at five places. It is even more strange that I never go without a deer!" one day he mused in his mother's hearing.

"It is because you are destined to net a deer a day!" commented the mother.

Well, she had given a part of her secret knowledge away. The prince insisted on knowing what she meant by that and the queen was obliged to tell him all, by and by.

The prince sat, composed in a strange silence. "Mother!" he declared after a long time, "I will change my fate!"

"How can you do that, my son? It is beyond man."

"I can, if I am responsible for the present fate of mine through my actions in my previous life!" said the little prince. He sat in meditation for long and emerged from it with determination writ large on his face.

That day, instead of five nets, he spread only one. As he had anticipated, he found a deer caught in it.

The next day instead of spreading the net anywhere on the ground, he hung it on a tree. Nevertheless, a deer was in it all the same!

And next, he hung the net not only on the tallest tree, but also he lighted a fire around the tree!

At midnight he woke up to behold a luminous being standing by his bedside.

"Are you by any chance the god of Fate?" he asked.

"I am."

"Thanks. I was expecting you," said the prince with a chuckle.

"Well, what do you mean by hanging your net on a tree and lighting a fire around it? Don't you understand that even if I am a god, in the material world I cannot steer clear of physical laws, that carrying the deer to the tree-top was a tough task?"

"But I am destined to net a deer a day and the one who knows it for certain is, of course, the god of Fate. How he puts the deer into my net is his business," said the prince.

"Must you make me suffer for the boon I granted to you?" demanded the god.

"Had I not made your job difficult, you would not have cared to appear before me tonight," calmly stated the prince.

"But why did you wish me to appear before you?"

"So that you can erase the writing on my forehead which condemns me to an existence in exile!"

The god of Fate stood in silence. The prince closed his eyes and ardently aspired for a new destiny. A long time passed. The prince felt the god's hand passing on his forehead. He opened his eyes.

"With your will and aspiration, you have been able to change your old destiny," said the god of Fate. "My blessings are with you," he added as he disappeared.

Next day the friendly forest-dwellers brought the prince and his mother the report of a revolt in the kingdom. The usurper who had become a tyrant, had been dethroned. The queen and the prince proceeded to the palace forthwith.

Everybody recognised the queen. There was great rejoicing at getting back the real heir to the throne. The prince was crowned the king.

⊠⊠ The concept of fate does not arise out of an illogical doctrine of determinism. If the present circumstances of one's life are the result of his earlier will and action, his conscious will and action of the moment can naturally shape his future and even alter the course of the running present. This story projects this truth in a typical folktale way. ⊠⊠

"Come Back Properly Dressed!"

The young king was on an expedition to conquer lands. He was brave, crafty and clever. He conquered several lands around his kingdom. Smaller kings and chieftains were easily humbled by him. Elated and satisfied, he decided that it was time he went home.

He appointed his courtiers as governors of the conquered territories, left a battalion of his army with each and began his homeward journey with the remaining army and his general and minister.

One evening they camped in a valley, between the bank of a river and a hill. The king looked out through his tent, when all were asleep and all was silent. His eyes swerved to the hill-top. He was surprised. For atop the hill he marked a kind of light, faint but strange, a kind of luminosity he had never known. It appeared to beckon him. He felt a strong urge to climb the hill.

The king let the night pass. In the morning he called his minister and asked him to enquire who or what was there on the hill, without divulging to him about the light. The minister said, "My lord, I was talking to the elders of the village yonder last night. They informed me that atop the hill lives a hermit. Your Majesty might have observed the fire he keeps alight in front of his hut at night."

"Did you see that fire?" asked the king.

"I did, my Lord."

"What kind of light did the fire give out?"

The minister looked a bit intrigued. "Why, my Lord, the kind of light which any fire made by burning dry sticks and leaves gives!" he said.

The king understood that the strange aspect of light he had seen had been denied to his minister's sight.

"O Minister," said the king, "Climb the hill and inform the hermit that I would like to meet him."

"Very well, my Lord." The minister climbed the hill and disappeared atop it as the king looked on. He returned after three hours. "My Lord," he said, "the hermit welcomes you. But he said that you must present yourself before him properly dressed."

"That goes without saying," said the king. He changed into his formal royal dress, his upper garment decorated with six chunks of diamond indicating the six kingdoms he had conquered, and began climbing the hill. But midway he was greeted by a disciple of the hermit. "O king, the hermit has already observed you from the hilltop. He asks you to come back properly dressed," the disciple informed him.

The king stopped. "I understand," he said after a while. "This is not the fashion in which I should meet a hermit! I have been foolish. I attired myself as if I was going to meet another monarch!"

The king returned to his tent and put on the clothes of a commoner and set out for meeting the hermit.

He was stopped midway the hill once again by the hermit's disciple. "Come back, my Lord, properly dressed!" the disciple said summarily.

The king, stupefied, returned to his camp. "My Lord, please allow me to drag the hermit here," proposed the general who had been annoyed with the hermit's impudence.

"General, haven't you dragged a full dozen vanquished kings as our prisoners and thrown them before us? What is great in your hauling up an old, unarmed hermit before us?" the king rejoined sternly. "We must meet the hermit on his terms."

The next day the king secured two pieces of ochre linen and put them on, one around his waist and the other on his upper body. This time he climbed speedily, sure of his eligibility to meet the hermit.

But alas! he was stopped for the third time. "My Lord, my master wants you to come back properly dressed," the hermit's disciple calmly informed him.

The king whose resounding orders for conquest brought earthquakes and holocausts, stood stunned. He was on the verge of tears. Quietly he returned to his tent. He sat alone, asking his guards not to admit anybody.

He could push his way up and oblige the hermit to see him. But that would mean nothing. He could put the hermit to death as he had done to so many others and nobody would dare to utter a word in protest. But that too would mean nothing. He had conquered all the lands extending up to the visible horizons and beyond. But he felt that now he sat defeated, humbled.

The sun went down. Dusk set in. Nobody had the courage to disturb the king.

Then the screen at the entrance of his tent parted. The king looked up. For a moment flashed the unearthly light he had seen at night. There stood the hermit.

"My son, how well-dressed you are!" said the hermit. The king stood up and then bowed to him and mumbled out, "Sir, I don't know. I am dressed as I should be while in the privacy of my chamber!"

"In the privacy of your heart, my dear king, you realise how humble you are, don't you ?" asked the hermit.

"Yes. The futility of my conquests, all the bloodshed, the foolishness of spending time on such expeditions have begun to dawn on me ...."

"It is the dawn of wisdom in you, my son. And I wanted you to be dressed in wisdom. All other dresses are either bare necessity or simple vanity," said the hermit as he embraced the king. The king felt the soothing light he had seen flooding his heart.

Myself

The bull dedicated to Lord Shiva at the village temple was a very proud creature. It enjoyed charging at whoever passed by it, even though it never really harmed anybody. Scared by it, some people, who could not run well, would roll on the dust and some would fall into the roadside bushes.

The village landlord's son, Shivashankar, who used to mostly live at his maternal uncle's house miles away, because they had a good primary school there, had come to his own village and was playing with the boys of his age on the river-bank, not far from the temple.

He sulked under the humiliation of being charged at by the bull while he was passing by it, for no fault of his. Luckily his playmates had not seen his plight. They told him, in the way of warning him, "The bull is a haughty one. We are accustomed to its rowdism and we don't mind it. Besides, it being Lord Shiva's bull, nobody can give it a beating, you know!"

But the young heir was not consoled. He was not just 'anybody'; he was the landlord's son, in fact the only son, himself the future landlord. No bull can do towards him what it can do towards anybody else and get away with it!

A mendicant was passing by. The poor man, scantily dressed and holding a tattered bag for collecting alms, was sure to provoke the bull—thought the boys—and the bull would charge at him and he would not even know how to run.

It was going to be fun!

The boys waited with bated breath. The zamindar's son, in order to show that he was different from and braver than the rest, went closer to the bull, in order to enjoy the fun better, albeit keeping himself behind the haughty creature so that it did not see him.

The mendicant was not unfamiliar with the bull's habit. He slowed his pace and muttered "Shivashankar, Shivashankar !" as he passed by it. This name of the deity of the shrine, uttered with devotion, always pleased the bull and it remained calm. The mendicant walked past it facing no problem.

Being nearer to the bull, the landlord's son alone heard the mendicant's muttering. He was delighted for two reasons. First, he had leant the secret of keeping the bull calm. Second, his own name was Shivashankar!

"The mendicant is really brave!" said the boys.

Shivashankar returned to his friends, clapping his hands and announcing, "I too can pass by the bull and it will behave!"

"No, please don't go near it!" cautioned his friends. "You can never predict its mood."

But Shivashankar, sure that he knew the secret of keeping the bull tame, braved into its presence, muttering, "Myself, myself, myself!"

After all his name was Shivashankar!

The bull charged at him with a far greater gusto than ever. Shivashankar ran for his life and fell down, stumbling on a boulder.

The mendicant had not gone too far. He came running to the spot and lifted up the boy from the dust. Shivashankar's friends too came runing.

Shivashankar was in tears. What is more, he was bewildered. What went wrong?

The Sadhu Who Saved a Village

Not far from the city of Delhi, on the river Yamuna, was a small and isolated village surrounded by acres of cornfields. Although the city throbbed with events and excitements, the village was as quiet as a picture.

One morning the villagers saw an old Sadhu whom they had never seen before seated under the banyan tree on the village square.

"Wherefrom do you come, Sadhu Baba, and what is the purpose of your being here?" asked the villagers.

"I come from the same Mother from which you all come. My purpose of being here is to live for a few days among you, the children of my Mother," replied the Sadhu with a kindly smile.

The villagers built a small hut for him under the banyan tree. As days passed, the Sadhu became the friend, philosopher and guide of all. He solved numerous life-problems of the folks with his wit and wisdom and inspired them to live honestly and truthfully.

Once it so happened that an epidemic struck the fowls in the village. They died by the dozen. The villagers reported their loss to the Sadhu. "It is sad that you lost your fowls. But if you have faith in God and if you pray to Him, the loss may prove to be a matter of gain!"

Not that all the villagers accepted what the Sadhu said. But they kept quiet because they revered him.

The next week the villagers felt even more disturbed, for all the dogs had left the village. Dogs were indispensable for a village at night because of burglars haunting that region.

But when they told the Sadhu about it, he only repeated his message : "If you have faith in God and if you pray to Him, even this will prove a blessing in disguise!"

A strange thing happened thereafter. In those days there were no matchboxes. People either rubbed two pieces of stones for sparks of fire to emerge or they kept the fire alive in their ovens all the time. One day fire went out in all the ovens in all the households of the village and however much the people tried, they failed to make fire out of their stones.

Perplexed, they approached the Sadhu and reported the matter to him.

"Did anything like this ever happen before?" he asked.

"Never," replied the villagers.

"Then there must be some very special cause behind the phenomenon," observed the Sadhu. His reply, however, could not quite satisfy the villagers.

The Sadhu kept a holy fire continuously burning in his hut. Even that was found extinguished. The villagers started doubting the holiness of the Sadhu. If whatever happened to ordinary people also happened to him, in what way was he superior to them?

Some villagers prepared to proceed to the next village to fetch fire. But the Sadhu stopped them with his stern words: "You are not likely to die for lack of fire for one night! Why don't you wait till the morning and see? What if you don't cook your food or even go without food for a night?"

Early in the morning some villagers were on their way to the suburbs of the city to fetch fire. Suddenly they saw something like a sandstorm advancing towards them. They hid behind the ruins of a wall. What appeared like sandstorm

was found, before long, to be a large army on horse-back, commanded by a foreign invader. They had lately plundered the city and had passed through so many neighbouring villages, burning houses and killing people mercilessly.

They halted near the ruins. The leader and his son were at the head of the marauding army.

"There, Father, is yet another village. Let us invade it!" The son exclaimed, his finger pointed at the isolated village where the Sadhu lived.

"No use, you naive young fellow! That is a deserted village. You don't hear a single note of cock-a-doodle even though it is morning. No dog barks. No smoke is seen coiling over the house-tops. That means not a soul lives there."

The invaders then galloped away in another direction.

The hiding villagers hurried back to their folks and trembling with the terror which they had passed through, they narrated what they heard. Everybody realised how true were the Sadhu's observations. They rushed towards his hut to express their gratitude to him. But the hut was empty. The Sadhu had left. Nobody knew about his next destination.

In Quest of the Beautiful

There was a woman who worked for the queen. The queen trusted her very much.

While sweeping the queen's room, sometimes the woman found pearls or gold beads which could have fallen from the queen's several necklaces and other jewellery. She faithfully restored them to the queen. The queen was so pleased with her that she let her keep a few such precious things for herself.

The woman's little son lived at his maternal uncle's house in a distant village. It was because the uncle was a teacher and a number of boys lived with him for their education.

One day the boy returned to his parents. At night he saw the pearls and the gold beads his mother had stored. "How beautiful these are!" he exclaimed, handling those glittering objects.

"They are beautiful. But, my son, only if you see the queen adorned with similar and more precious things, you'll know what true beauty is," commented the boy's mother. "She is the most beautiful of anything I've known."

The boy fell silent and appeared absorbed in some thought. He was missing in the morning. The anxious parents began looking for him.

Neighbours also cooperated with them in their search of the boy. But he was not to be found.

Years later the mother received a message from her lost son : "Mother, I had heard from my uncle that the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, were all ornaments of God. Your statement that while the ornaments were beautiful, the queen who put them on was much more beautiful, suddenly inspired in me a different urge. The sun, the moon, the stars are so beautiful. How magnificent must be God whom they adorn! I went out in search of Him. You will be happy to learn that I have found Him. He is so magnificent that words cannot describe His charm."

The mother wept, but she was also happy that her son had achieved what only few could.

How to Lead Home A Cow

Ramballav was in need of a milch cow, for his little granddaughter needed milk.

As there was no such cow on sale in his own village or in villages surrounding it, he was obliged to walk a long way to the weekly cattle market.

It was a big market and on sale were hundreds of cows. Ramballav spent hours in choosing the one which at last appeared to him as the best cow available. She looked healthy and she had a handsome calf.

By the time Ramballav finished bargaining and concluding the deal, the sun had set and both buyers and the sellers had begun to disperse. Ramballav hoped to find one or two known people who would be going in the direction of his village. But it so happened that nobody from his area had visited the market on that particular day.

He dragged the cow along, but as he proceeded, the cow proved more and more stubborn in resisting his pull. A time came when she refused to budge. Ramballav was no longer young. He sweated and panted, dragging the cow or pushing it.

It was already evening. He did not know if he could make it to home at that pace even by midnight. He regretted aloud for having bought the cow.

"My friend, there is a simple solution to your problem," said a passer-by, a mendicant.

Ramballav, gasping for breath, looked at the mendicant. The mendicant picked up the little calf and held it to his bosom and the cow at once began to follow him. Ramballav was amazed at the cow's docile conduct. After five minutes the mendicant handed over the calf to Ramballav. There was no problem thereafter. As Ramballav, holding the calf, walked on, the cow followed him smoothly, mooing once in a while, as if to assure the calf that she was with it. Ramballav reached home in time.

Narrating his version of this story, Shri Vijaykrishna Goswami says that the calf symbolises a true devotee. If one befriends a true devotee of God, or accepts him as Guru, the Divine spontaneously remains with him.

The Changing Taste

King Suvarna had heard much about Sage Suryadev who had his Ashram in the forest. He desired to pass a night in the company of the sage. He sent his minister to the Ashram to talk to the sage and obtain the latter's permission for his short sojourn.

"Your king is a good soul and a seeker. Why should he otherwise wish to pass his time in a hut, away from his usual comforts? He is welcome, O noble messenger," said the sage and he retired for his meditation. One of the inmates of the Ashram handed over a cup of milk to the minister.

The tired minister seemed to relish every drop of it. "I have never tasted so delicious milk in my life. The source of this milk must be a very special cow!" observed the minister.

"Well, she is our guru's favourite cow. She has been brought up under his love and care!" informed the disciple.

After resting for a while the minister left for the capital. Next day he escorted the king to the Ashram. The sage received the king with great affection. The king prostrated himself to the sage. The sage blessed him and offered him a seat made of soft grass. Then he asked one of his disciples to treat the valued guest to a drink of milk.

The minister at once whispered to the disciple, "Please offer the king milk from the special cow—I mean the favourite cow of the sage."

"Yes, Sir, I will do so. That also is the guru's instruction," said the disciple.

He brought milk both for the king and his minister. While handing over the cup to the minister, he said, "This too is from the same cow."

"Thank you," said the minister. But as he began sipping it, his lips were curled. He asked the disciple in a whisper again, "Is this milk from the same cow? Are you sure of it?"

"Yes, Sir, I poured it into two cups and gave one to the king and the other to you," said the disciple.

The king was busy talking to the sage while sipping the milk.

The sage went inside the hut for a while. The minister was left alone with the king.

"Your Majesty, how did the milk taste?"

"Wonderful, just wonderful!" said the king.

"Your Majesty, I too had found it wonderful—yesterday, so much so that I had decided to buy the cow from the sage. I calculated that even if he demanded a hundred gold coins for the cow, I will not hesitate to pay it. But, surprisingly, today the milk tasted quite ordinary, like any other milk!" lamented the minister.

The king grew grave. "My wise minister," he said, "You found the milk wonderful yesterday because you felt grateful to the sage. Then you grew wiser! The mean little fellow in you began to evaluate the value of the milk in terms of money, not in terms of the sage's kindness. How can the milk taste wonderful to you today?"

The minister hung his head.

"My dear fellow, I wish to pass a night here in peace, free from calculations of profit and loss or what tastes good or bad. Will you please leave me alone?" the king said again.

The minister took leave of him. The sage came out of his hut, smiling, as if he understood everything!

Of Truth and Lie

"Who was great—Purusha or Prakriti?" was the issue on which Viresh and Sukhvir quarelled.

"Don't dangle your beard before me," said Sukhvir. "I had read in a holy book that people who have unusually long beards are stupid. Now I find that it is true!"

Viresh, alas, had cultivated a very long beard.

"Do you dare call me stupid? I will complain to the king's magistrate," said Viresh. "Be ready to accompany me there tomorrow."

At night Viresh wondered if the magistrate would not declare him stupid since according to the holy book, very long beard indicates stupidity and the magistrate, a learned man, ought to have read the holy book. Viresh decided to shorten his beard by burning the lower portion of it with the help of the tiny lamp in front of him.

The lamp was tiny, but the fire proved formidable at the touch of the highly combustible white beard. Before Viresh knew what was happening, the fire consumed his entire beard, then his eye-brows and next spread to his head and destroyed the greater part of his luxuriant hair.

Viresh was shocked. At least not to look absolutely funny, he removed the remaining few stumps and shaved his head entirely.

Next day the magistrate heard the complaint of Viresh that Sukhvir called him stupid because he had a long beard.

"But I see no beard, not even a strand of hair on you!" wondered the magistrate.

Viresh had no option but to tell how he lost all his hair.

"Gentleman, do you still believe that you are not stupid?" asked the magistrate.

All present in the court laughed. Sukhvir was right in his comment.

"Speaking a truth is no offence," declared the magistrate dismissing Viresh's petition.

Then he turned towards Sukhvir.

"Which is the holy book which says that long beard is a sign of stupidity?" he asked.

Sukhvir lowered his head and smiled apologetically.

"Speaking a lie—and that too attributing it to a holy book—is an offence. You must pay a fine of fifty silver coins.

Then, the magistrate concluded, saying, "Both of you must pay a hundred silver coins each for wasting the court's time on a trivial matter."

The comment is on the absurdity of arguments and quarrels in matters of faith or philosophy, and the snobbery that goes with it.

Trying to Know the Elephant

Four orphans who had lost their eyesights for different reasons—one because of small pox, another from typhoid etc. had been given shelter in a room adjacent to the village shrine. They could sing and play the drum and cymbals during the evening rituals of the deity. The authorities of the shrine maintained them.

They discussed among themselves of many things from their memory—of the memorable events which they had witnessed, of uncommon beasts they had seen, of fairs and festivals they had attended. There were several things common in their experience; but one thing none of them had experienced was the elephant.

One day a mahout, while guiding his elephant from one big temple to another, took rest at the shrine. Excited villagers surrounded the beast and surveyed it with amazement. After they dispersed, the four blind friends came out and requested the mahout to lead them near the elephant.

The mahout obliged them. The four friends felt and patted different parts of the huge animal's body for a while and then retreated into their room.

An hour later the mahout's afternoon nap was disrupted by loud shouts and arguments verging on a quarrel. The noise emanated from the room in which the four friends lived. The mahout went in to find out what the matter was.

One of the friends who had felt the elephant's side insisted that the elephant was like a soft wall; for the second one who had felt its leg, it was like a pillar; the third, who had run his hands on one of its huge ears was sure that it was like a winnowing-fan. The fourth, who had felt its tusk, described the animal as a crowbar. Nobody was willing to consider the experience of the others as having any truth in them. Their shouts were shrill and maddening.

The mahout out-shouted them into silence. "Who says that my elephant is not like a soft wall? Who says it is not like a pillar or a winnowing-fan or a crow-bar?" he asked. "My elephant is all that and much more," he asserted.

The four friends kept quiet for the time being. But once the mahout had departed, they resumed their debate and attacked one another vehemently.

⊠⊠ This is one of the most popular stories in circulation to emphasise the truth that the Reality is too vast for the petty human mind to grasp it. The blind friends represent the mental blindness of men who hit upon an aspect of Truth and insist that to be the entire Truth—be they theologians, philosophers, devotees of certain deities or seekers of any other category. ⊠⊠

The Hand that Thrashed is the Hand that Nursed

The bearded thief who had entered the landlord's house tried to escape under the cover of darkness when found out and given a chase. Meanwhile Sadhu Bholababa, an inmate of a nearby Ashram, who happened to pass by, was pounced upon by some pursuers who mistook him to be the thief. Without waiting to hear the Sadhu, they began to thrash him mercilessly.

Just then the real thief was caught by another group of people. The Sadhu's persecutors realised their blunder. But it was by then too late. Sadhu Bholababa was in a state of swoon.

He was carried to his Ashram by the repentant villagers. They laid him down on his bed and fanned him and sprinkled water on his face. Some of them applied medicine on his wounds.

"Pour a little warm milk into his mouth. That should help him to regain consciousness," said an experienced elder. Accordingly warm milk was brought. An inmate of the Ashram slowly poured it into his mouth.

Sadhu Bholababa opened his eyes. As usual, a smile appeared on his face. The anxious Ashramites realised that he was out of danger.

But they were anxious to know if he had regained his wit and if his perception was normal.

"Bholababa, who is pouring milk into your mouth?" asked a friend.

"The same person," replied Bholababa. That sounded enigmatic.

"Bholababa, what do you mean by the same person?" the friend asked.

"The person who beat me up, is also the one who is feeding me," replied Bholababa.

⊠⊠ There is a state of consciousness living in which one sees a single force at work behind everything. A person living in such a consciousness is incapable of feeling hatred even towards his persecutors. ⊠⊠

Three Boons

A merchant was leading his caravan through a forest. They stopped near a brook at noon. While his workers were busy cooking the lunch for the party, the merchant leisurely strolled ahead and sat down under a tree.

A gang of woodcutters, in search of useful timber, saw the tree and decided to cut it down.

"Will you please move away?" the gang-leader asked the merchant.

"Who are you to order me about? Do you know who are you talking to?" the merchant rebuffed them.

The woodcutters did not know who he was. But they feared that they had offended a very important man. "Pardon us for disturbing you, Sir. We will look for some other tree," their leader said.

The happy merchant dozed off. He heard a very sweet voice, coming from the bushy top of the tree, telling him, "It was so conscientious of you to scare those fellows away. I have lived in this tree for a hundred years. I will leave it tonight, at an auspicious hour. I don't mind if they cut it down tomorrow—which, of course they would do once having selected it. But had they hacked it now, I would have felt harassed."

"Who are you, please?" the merchant, still in a state of mild sleep, asked the speaker.

"I am a being, a spirit. That is all. But I have some power and I wish to reward you. Soon a small fruit of this tree shall fall on your head. The period of time between the sunset and midnight is auspicious. Hold the fruit in your palms, put your forehead on it and ask for the reward. You have two options. You may ask for *Vidya* that will make you wiser than you are. That is to say, you would develop greater faith in Providence, which, in turn, would give you peace. Alternatively, you can choose *Avidya* which will fulfil any three wishes for tangible gains."

The voice stopped and the merchant woke up. Lo and behold, a tiny fruit fell on his head, quite softly, and leaped onto his lap. He picked it up and was thrilled at the prospect of receiving a reward.

His manager came to inform him that the lunch was ready. He pocketed the fruit.

After eating and resting for a while, they resumed their journey. The merchant reached home soon after the sunset.

He let the first quarter of the night pass. When all the members of the family, after their dinner, retired for the night, he smiled mysteriously and showed the precious fruit to his wife and told her about the benefit it is likely to bring him.

"What do you propose to choose?" asked the lady.

"I will like to be wiser."

"What nonsense do you speak!" said the lady. Are you not the most successful merchant in an area of one hundred villages? Could a fool have achieved such a position? You have enough wisdom with you. More of that stuff will be only a burden. Let's go for something tangible," advised the lady.

"For instance?"

"All these years I have regretted the awkward shape of my nose as well as that of yours. I have overheard people referring to us by the peculiarity of our noses. Since we can ask for three boons, let us have, to begin with, beautiful noses!" suggested the lady.

The merchant held the fruit in his palms, brought his head down to touch it and muttered, "Let's have beautiful noses!"

Alas, a hundred noses—all beautiful, sprouted all over their various limbs. Four noses each decorated their foreheads, two each on their cheeks, a dozen on their backs and so on and so forth.

"Aluck! What are we going to do with so many beautiful noses? No doubt we can inhale plenty of clean air depriving others of it around us, but we would become wonderful exhibits for the public and that would be far more awkward than our old awkward noses!" observed the merchant in disgust.

"Why are you wasting time instead of praying for disappearance of these things?" said his impatient wife.

"Let our noses disappear !" the merchant told the fruit.

And all their noses, including the original ones, were gone!

"O our bad luck! Let's immediately have our old good noses back!" cried out the lady.

The merchant conveyed his last prayer to the fruit accordingly. Of course, they had their old noses back with which they sighed—at once sighs of relief as well as despair.

▩ ▩ Of the several versions of this story, this one is closest to the one narrated by Swami Vivekananda. The significance is deep: Freedom of choice sans wisdom is totally meaningless. ▩ ▩

The Man who went Forward

Long long ago, in a small village lived a poor man named Haridas. He earned his living by toiling in the fields or the households of the wealthy.

But there were not many wealthy people in the locality and they had not enough work to offer him day after day.

Once it so happened that he went without any work for three consecutive days. His family was on the verge of starving.

"Let me go into the forest. Maybe I'll find some edible fruit or roots," he thought and entered the forest.

After some searching, he found some juicy guavas hanging from a tree, quite ripe. He was delighted. He climbed the tree and plucked them. "This much should do for today," he thought as he climbed down.

On his journey back home, he saw a hermit seated under a tree. The old man looked so weak that Haridas was sure he had not eaten for many days. "I can give him my share of the guavas. I can pull on for yet another day without any food," he thought and he quietly kept a few guavas before the hermit.

The hermit opened his eyes and smiled. Haridas bowed to him. "This is my humble offering to you, Sir," he said. "I wish I could give you something more valuable. But I'm so poor!"

The hermit smiled again, but said nothing.

"Sir, give me a word of advice before I leave you. I would consider myself fortunate to hear your voice," said Haridas.

"Go forward, my boy!" said the hermit and he closed his eyes.

Haridas decided to act as advised. He stood up, turned and began walking forward. He had not gone far when he found a piece of silver lying before him. He picked it up and straightaway went to the bazar. He sold it and returned home with a bagful of rice, vegetables, sweets, and some surplus money.

Next day, he went into the forest with sweets for the hermit. But the old man was not to be seen.

Suddenly Haridas thought, "The hermit had asked me to go forward. He had not told me how far! Let me go farther."

He started walking. In a dense area of the forest he found a piece of gold. He returned home, delighted. He sold it in the town for a good price. He constructed a house, bought lands, and opened a shop in the village.

He prospered. Years passed. Then one day he wondered, "Why should I not go still farther?"

He began walking into the forest and passed the spots where he had found the silver and the gold.

Suddenly what should he see but a piece of diamond lying before him! He carried it to the king. Experts said that a diamond of that quality was not there either in the royal collection or among the queen's jewellery. The king bought it. He was also impressed by Haridas's humility and goodness. He asked him to visit the court from time to time.

Familiarity with the king brought Haridas prestige in society. After a year the king made him a noble in his court. By then he had become a prominent merchant and landlord. His sons managed his business and his property well.

Once in a while Haridas would feel a strong urge to meet the hermit and convey his gratefulness to him. But he never

saw the old man again, though he looked for him, here and there in the forest time and again.

One day Haridas asked himself why he should not go even farther forward! Next day he took the path meandering through the forest and never stopped walking till it was evening. In fact, he had forgotten time. He had crossed the spot where he had found the diamond.

He stumbled against a rock and realised that it was dark. He had come deep into the forest. He must find a shelter for the night.

He looked in every direction. Soon he saw the flicker of a light. He advanced towards it. There was a small hut. Inside, before a lamp, sat an old man. Haridas tiptoed in and knelt down and gazed into his face. Yes, he was the hermit he had met some twenty years ago. The hermit had not changed.

"The hermit had given me the key-word that brought me prosperity, but he himself continued to dwell in a hut. Why? One who could lead others to prosperity could have prospered himself if he wished to!" Haridas continued to reflect on the question.

The hermit opened his eyes and smiled. Haridas suddenly seemed to have found the answer to his question.

"What do you want now?" asked the hermit.

"Master! Give me the kind of prosperity you have got!"

"Why not! Don't stop going forward!" said the hermit.

Thereafter, Haridas was seen neither in his village nor in the royal court.

Indra to Blame!

There was a Pundit who was quite wealthy. He had a large orchard.

One afternoon a cow entered his orchard and ate up a few brinjals. The Pundit pounded it with a lathi. The beating proved too much for the creature. It died.

The poor man who owned the cow raised a shrill cry. Passers-by who saw the Pundit's deed were stunned. The villagers were shocked. Apart from the fact that the cow was a valuable asset materially speaking, it was a sacred animal. For a Pundit to kill it was the height of bizarrerie.

The prominent ones of the village met the Pundit. They suggested that the Pundit pay compensation to the poor man and do some penance for his own sin. Penance, of course, was his personal business. But compensation he must pay.

"What have I done to give compensation and do penance?" asked the Pundit, feigning surprise.

"You killed a cow! What worse could you do?"

"How did you conclude that I killed a cow?" asked the Pundit.

"So many people saw you thrashing it to death!" said the villagers.

"Oh that!" laughed the Pundit. "How to explain the fact to you who know nothing of the complexity of realities? I did not kill it, it is God Indra who killed it."

"How does God Indra come into the picture?" asked the villagers, puzzled.

The Pundit recited a difficult couplet from a scripture. It meant that Indra was the spirit and the presiding deity of the human hands. The Pundit said in conclusion, "So, if anyone is responsible for what my hands did, it is God Indra. Do you understand? Go to Indra and ask him for the compensation!"

The people dispersed, unable to rebuff him.

Two days later a very dignified looking person was seen walking the village street. He stopped near the Pundit's

house. "How wonderful!" he said aloud, looking at the Pundit's orchard.

"What is wonderful, Sir?" asked the Pundit.

"This orchard. I wonder who could have raised this!" mused the stranger.

"I have raised it, Sir, with my own hands!"

"Excellent. But who has dug these well-designed tunnels through the orchard?"

"Myself, Sir, myself!" exclaimed the flattered Pundit.

"Who raised those beautiful flower-plants?"

"I Sir, I, with this very pair of hands!" said the Pundit, lifting his arms high, unmindful of the crowd that had collected behind the stranger.

"Fine. Now, can I put a small question to you?"

"Why not, Sir!"

"If it is you who did all this with your own pair of hands, must the poor Indra be blamed when it comes to killing the cow?"

The Pundit's face fell. The stranger, who was none other than Indra, went away.

The villagers now understood the hollowness of the Pundit's logic. They compelled him to pay sufficient compensation to the owner of the cow.

⊠⊠ This belongs to the genre of satires directed against hypocrites to whom scriptures came handy whenever it suited their mean interest. It is true that the different limbs of the human body are related in a subtle way to different energies represented by different gods, but to use such knowledge for serving any purpose at a lower plane is unpardonable. ⊠⊠

Signs of the Ascetic

The beautiful Nirupama rushed into her husband's office like a whiff of tornado. Ganesh lifted his eyes from the important document he was studying and grinned. "What's the matter?" he asked, his eyebrows raised.

Nirupama drew a chair closer to his table and, her elbows resting on the document spread before her husband, asked, "Have you seen Vimal? He has just been back from his pilgrimage."

There was anxiety in her tone, tinged with a hint of mystery.

"He was here a moment ago," said Ganesh.

"Was he?" Nirupama was evidently happy. "I must say, not because he is my only brother but as a judge of men and matters, that he is courtesy personified. Look how he came to greet his beloved brother-in-law immediately instead of relaxing at home for a while, after such a long and tiring journey!"

"Courteous indeed he was!" said Ganesh after some hesitation. "But he also had an immediate reason for meeting me. Someone had offered to sell him a necklace of Rudraksha beads and he needed the money..."

"Rudraksha beads which ascetics and holy men wear?" Nirupama shrieked in horror.

"Why are you upset? The ascetic do not put on the Rudraksha beads fitted to a gold chain. But that was the speciality of the necklace your brother bought."

"How can I help being upset? I came to ask you whether you took note of his newly grown beard or not. And now I learn about his interest in the Rudraksha. Why did you pay him to buy it?"

"Nirupama!" Ganesh reminded her. "Have you not asked me, very firmly and a hundred times, never to refuse any demand made by Vimal? Have you not told me that it was my sacred duty to open my purse to him the moment he appeared before me?"

"You don't understand!" Nirupama was at her best in showing helplessness. "Vimal is an only brother—and younger to boot of an only sister, that is I. What would happen to my parents should he turn ascetic? They would not survive the shock!"

"What sign of asceticism did you see on your brother, please?" demanded Ganesh, laying his pen down and fixing his gaze on Nirupama.

"Mere signs you're speaking of? But stark naked asceticism is knocking on the door of his being! We must do everything to scare it away. Do you ever care to observe his conduct? Don't you see how he keeps gazing at the sky, while lolling on an easy-chair, for an hour at a stretch? How could you miss taking note of the fact that all his *pyjamas* and *kurtas* tailored during the past six months...."

"Of the costliest silk of course!" interjected Ganesh. But Nirupama did not hear it and proceeded to complete her observation, "are of ochre colour, the unmistakable sign of other-worldliness?"

Ganesh nodded.

"Do men like you pay any attention to matters outside your rotten world of profit and loss? The boy is your sole brother-in-law and yet you fail to see how the sombre clouds of *Vairagya* is slowly filling up his horizon. Forget about his conduct or the colour of his clothes. He has already confided to me, not once but several times, that he was losing interest

in this world. He may break away from it any day—any moment. O God!"

Ganesh made no comment.

"Why keep mum?"

"Listen to me, Nirupama, if speak I must. A would-be ascetic does not threaten others with his intention. The ascetic mood matures within one—silently and secretly. One can practise detachment even without breaking away from one's actions. And, if one decides to break away from one's worldly life, one does not periodically notify others about it. One does so in a quite different way," said Ganesh, straightening up in his chair.

"What do you mean by different way?"

"If he resolves to quit, he gets up like this and goes away like this!" said Ganesh getting up and slowly advancing towards the door.

Nirupama realised the import of his remark a bit later. Ganesh never came back.

▩ ▩ More than a satire on those who find it convenient to arouse awe and sympathy in others, announcing their intention to get away from the so-called worldly life with beats of drum, the story shows how one might be developing an ascetic mood within one's solitary self, without the least outward sign of it. ▩ ▩

Far Beyond the Masks

The king was worried on account of his elder son. The charming young prince, who had returned to him after spending ten years at a gurukul in the forest, proved to be wise, intelligent, well-mannered and bright in every respect, but he had one weakness. He would forget everything the moment he heard someone chanting the Lord's name. He would listen to the singer or himself chant with rapt attention and would give anything the man or woman asked for. A day did not pass without the prince entertaining some ascetics or some pilgrims. He bestowed gifts on them lavishly.

The king and the minister tried to tell the prince that all those who passed themselves on as holy are not really so. Among them were charlatans. The prince ought to be careful. But the young man's mind did not seem to record the advice.

One day the king's guru, a sage, came to the palace. When alone with the sage, the king told him all about the prince. "I'm quite worried on account of the boy's vulnerability to a mere show of holiness put up by anybody. How can he be so easily deceived? Everybody feels that he is wonderful. But sometimes I wonder if he is not a fool!"

The sage pacified the king who was rather agitated. "I will, when the opportunity comes, disillusion him about those so-called holy men," he said. "Don't come to any conclusion about your son so soon."

Two days later a stranger who looked like a hermit, sent word that he wanted to meet the prince. The stranger sported

a long flowing beard and wore the ochre robe befitting a hermit. His was a towering figure.

Instantly the prince went out and received the stranger with great warmth. Meanwhile a spy informed the minister that the stranger was a fake hermit. In fact, he was a criminal and had just been released from jail. The minister sent the intelligence to the sage, but the sage found the prince so much taken up by the fake hermit that he did not have the heart to disillusion him.

The fake hermit left after being entertained by the prince to a sumptuous meal and some monetary reward.

The fellow was a magician by vocation. His practice had been interrupted by his being thrown into jail for five years. With the money he had received from the prince, he made or repaired the necessary tools and resumed showing magic at public places.

One day while the magician's show was going on in a park, the minister alerted the sage.

"Come, let us have a walk along the park", the sage suggested to the prince. The prince was always ready to obey him. Soon both were in the park, followed by the minister and some sepoys.

"Do you see that magician there?" the sage asked the prince. Both of them had taken position behind the crowd. The eyes of the crowd were glued to the show and nobody noticed the prince.

"Yes, Guruji, I see him."

"Do you recognise him? He is the fellow who masqueraded as a holy man and swindled you the other day. And earlier to appearing before you as a hermit, he was in jail as a criminal!" said the sage.

The prince gazed at the magician with wide eyes. He kept on observing him. The sage and the minister were happy that the cheat had been exposed and the prince would order the sepoys to arrest the fellow.

The magic show was over. The crowd dispersed. Those who had recognised the prince, the minister and the sage, bowed to them and went away quietly.

The magician was packing up when the prince's party confronted him. The sage was waiting to hear the prince's order to the sepoys to pounce upon the fellow. But what is this? A strange smile played on the prince's lips. There were tears in his eyes. He knelt down before the perplexed magician. "How wonderful is Thy play, my Lord!" he said "You were in jail as a criminal; you appeared before me as a saint and now you charm the masses with your magic!"

The prince felt silent, but kept on sitting unmoved. The sage understood that he was in a trance. The magician was in tears. The guru signed him to leave the place.

An hour later the prince and his companions were back in the palace. It was evening. The sage went over to the king and told him privately, "O King, your son is no fool, but a great soul who slips into Brahmic Consciousness again and again. Not that he is deceived by the appearances, but he sees through them and sees a reality which is far beyond our ken. However, time has not yet come when such a prince can be a ruler. So, don't depend on him to succeed you. Groom your younger son for the throne, but see to it that the elder prince is not taken to task for his conduct."

The Untouchable

On the bank of the sacred Godavari lived an ascetic. He lived in a small hut. The people of the nearby village were happy and proud that a holy man lived in their neighbourhood. They gave him food and fulfilled his other meagre needs.

The ascetic was quite conscious of the respect he commanded. He knew that the people will do whatever he wanted them to do. After his bath early in the morning, he sat for prayer on a slab of stone on the river. He asked the villagers not to disturb him in any way at that time.

The villagers took his instruction very seriously. If some of them must bathe early in the morning, they would take their dips as quietly as possible, away from the ghat where the holy man sat.

One morning the ascetic was surprised to see someone dashing into the river, missing touching him by a hair's breadth. Jets of water from the splash the stranger made fell on him. He stood up, trembling with rage and shouted at the bather, "How dare you ... dare you...." He could not complete his sentence.

But the boy who was swimming merrily with fierce strokes paid no attention to the holy man's tirade. In fact he could not hear him because of the splashing sound he made.

As soon as the boy emerged from the water, the ascetic slapped him, shouting, "You ghoul!" Just then a young man, panting and sweating, reached there and bowed to him keeping some distance.

"Sir," he said most politely, "This boy is my wife's younger brother. He hails from another village. He knew nothing of your morning rites. When I did not see him at home, I feared that very fond of swimming in the river that he is, he might have come here for a bath and disturbed your meditation. I came running, but it had been a bit too late!"

"The boy is your brother-in-law, is he?" the ascetic observed. He had calmed down, but since the speaker was an untouchable, his brother-in-law too was an untouchable. Hence the ascetic was obliged to take a bath once again for he had touched an untouchable in the process of slapping him.

The boy who stood silent, slowly entered the river and came out after a dip.

"What business had you to bathe again?" his sister's husband asked him impatiently.

"The ascetic had already taken bath. Why did he bathe again?" asked the boy.

"Do you forget that we are untouchables? He had touched you!

"I saw the ghoul in him when he slapped me. Isn't the ghoul untouchable?" said the boy. "That is why I had to bathe again."

The holy man stood speechless for a moment. Then he approached the boy and said, "Indeed, I had been possessed by the ghoul of anger and ego. If anybody was untouchable, it was I, not you."

Then he embraced the boy as the boy too touched his feet.

Curse or Blessing?

Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a hermit who lived in a forest not very far from the city of Pratisthana. Once in every two or three years he passed through the city, walking all alone towards a certain holy place.

It was a summer noon. The hermit stood in front of a large mansion and called out for some food. The master of the house who was expecting some important guests had just come out to his portico. He did not like the hermit, who in no way looked better than an ordinary mendicant, to stand before his gate when the guests were to arrive. "Come another time," he said, "I am expecting important visitors to discuss business."

"But I may not be hungry another time!" said the hermit.

"Get away! Be quick!" hollered the master of the house impatiently, waving his hand violently.

"You are already a man of lacs. Let Destiny make you a man of millions," said the hermit as he began to move away.

His parting words pleased the wealthy man. He asked a clerk of his to run behind the hermit and hand over a silver coin to him. But the hermit was not to be seen by the time the clerk fetching the coin, tried to locate him.

The master forgot about it, for his guests had started arriving.

But a gardener, who lived in the neighbourhood of the mansion, and who observed the hermit hurriedly going away, followed him. "The wealthy man was so mean and rude to

the hermit. Yet the hermit wished him prosperity. Strange indeed is the hermit!" he thought.

The hermit walked down a mile and stood in front of a poor man's hut on the outskirts of the city. "Can you give me some food to eat?" he asked.

The poor man came out and bowed to him. "Come in, Baba, but my hut is in ruins and it is a tattered thatch under which you have to sit," said the poor man.

"And let the next cyclone sweep away the thatch!" said the hermit as he entered the hut.

"Thank you, Baba. And I have only a mugful of water to offer you," said the poor man.

"And let your well dry up totally," said the hermit.

"Thank you, but there is only a handful of rice in my earthen pot," said the poor man.

"And by tomorrow let your pot go the way of all earthen pots!" said the hermit. Then he ate the rice and drank the water.

After a while he got up, blessed the poor man silently by keeping his hand on his head and walked away.

The gardener who had followed the hermit that far had no courage to do so any more. He had begun to fear the hermit. What kind of a holy man is one who blesses a greedy, selfish rich man to become richer and curses a compassionate poor man to go without even a thatch?

He cultivated acquaintance with the poor man. "Do you know? The hermit blessed a wealthy merchant who refused him even a morsel of food, saying that may he grow richer!"

"Did he? What a pity!" said the poor man.

"Whom do you pity?" asked the gardener growing even more intrigued.

"The wealthy man, of course!"

The gardener stared at him. He had no doubt about the hermit's craziness. Now he found the poor man to be equally crazy, if not more. He did not know what to say.

The poor man understood his mind. He made him sit down beside him. "Do you think that it was the hermit who was speaking? I heard through his voice the voice of *Kala,* the all powerful Time. I knew for long that it was time for me to get over all my petty attachments. But ignorance still kept me bound to them. The hermit's words indicated that soon I will be left with nothing to be attached with. God alone will be my refuge."

"But what sense was there in his blessing the rich man to be richer? And, why do you pity the rich man on that account?" asked the gardener.

"As I told you, it is the voice of *Kala* that spoke through the hermit. The Lord generally fulfils the different desires of different people. The rich man's desire was to grow richer. He shall find his desire fulfilled. But more wealth will bring him more problems and consequently more disgust. That way, through much suffering, he will learn to be disenchanted. I took pity on him because he will be obliged to take the hard way to light," said the poor man.

The gardener bowed to him and returned home.

Varied are the paths the mystics have explored to realise their goals. One of them is the path of renunciation. The poor man in this story exemplifies the ascetic attitude of renunciation, not necessarily the only philosophy of renunciation. The way of renunciation the Gita shows is different. One can remain engrossed in action and yet be in a state of inner renunciation, without any attachment to action.

The primary lesson the story imparts is, what a mystic's utterance means on the surface is not what it really means.

The Man Atop the Hill, the Man Midway the Hill and the Climbers

Two young scholars were climbing the hill. Midway the hill, in a cave, lived a savant. They must meet him.

But the savant's cave was not their final goal. The savant had promised to lead them to the top of the hill. There, in a hut, lived a sage. The savant was to introduce the young men to the sage. They would like to be blessed by him.

Two other persons who were climbing the hill at the same time were a shepherd and an old man. The shepherd was leading his flock of sheep and a few pigs. One of his pigs had been injured and it walked with great difficulty. The shepherd thrashed it from time to time to make it move faster. But that only added to the pig's plight. The shepherd too was much troubled on account of that pig. He had to check the speed of the other animals to keep pace with it.

Suddenly the old man asked the shepherd, "Will you let me carry the pig up till you reach your destination?"

"What stops you from doing that?" said the shepherd.

The old man stopped and lifted the pig on his shoulders and walked on quietly. But one could see that it was not an easy feat for him. The two young men were greatly impressed because he retained his unusually calm and dignified bearing.

Of the two young men, one was an adept at reading the thoughts of men. He observed the shepherd who looked at

them and smiled meaningfully. The fellow's smile conveyed what he thought of the old man: "There are fools and fools, but there is no fool like an old fool!"

The second young man had learnt the art of reading the feelings of animals. He looked at the pig's half-closed eyes. Instantly he knew that the pig had forgotten its trouble. It had no sense of gratitude either. In other words, it felt nothing!

The two scholars reached the savant's cave. When they were relaxed, they narrated the incident to the savant. One of them said, "I wonder if the old man did any good to either the shepherd or even to the pig. The shepherd, in fact, was laughing at him. The pig felt nothing."

"And, even if he lessened the difficulty of one of them, he increased his own difficulty in climbing. Objectively speaking, his action was unwarranted, for one had to suffer anyway! The pig's suffering stopped, but the old man suffered!" said the second young man.

Replied the savant, "Whoever be the old man, he acted to forestall a future suffering."

"Whose?" asked the young men.

"His own. He would have remembered the scene and would have suffered from the fact that he did not do anything to assuage the pig's travail or even the poor shepherd's. He must have been extremely compassionate, a man of delicate conscience," said the savant.

The two friends appreciated the savant's observation.

Late in the afternoon they climbed the rest of the hill and reached their last destination. To their great amazement they found that the sage was none other than the old man who carried the pig.

They talked on various issues. But, before taking leave of the sage, the young seekers could not help asking him, "Sir, what exactly was your motive in carrying the injured pig uphill? Is it to reduce the shepherd's botheration? Is it to

relieve the pig of its pain? Or is it to satisfy your own conscience?"

The sage blinked at them. He did not remember a thing!

The three visitors came out. "What a fool I was to interpret his action even in glowing terms! Does one remember one's breathing process? It just happens!" commented the savant.

⊠ ⊠ The savant had given the noblest possible interpretation to the sage's conduct. But even that proved to be irrelevant, because the sage's action was spontaneous, not to be measured by any yardstick. He would not have been less sage-like if he would not have carried the pig! ⊠ ⊠

A Speculation that Became a Prophecy

The Sadhu and his Chela were tired. Also, the hot summer noon made them thirsty. Unfortunately, the village they happened to pass through was most inhospitable. They knocked on two doors, but the inmates of the houses were reluctant to oblige them even with a little water to drink, what to speak of offering them food or shelter.

They sat down under a deserted shed. "My son, we should leave this village as soon as possible," said the Sadhu.

"No doubt the people of this village seem to be an unkind lot. But is there any special reason for which we must leave the village at once?" asked the disciple.

"I feel, the atmosphere here is such that any moment a man-made disaster may break out. I feel uneasy and suffocated," said the Sadhu—and looking into the shop opposite the shed, he said again, "Anything can cause a conflict—even that grocer unnecessarily dipping his finger in a jar of honey and wiping his finger on the wall."

As there were no customers in the shop, the idle grocer sat handling different items without any reason.

"All right, Baba, let's go," agreed the Chela. "But, let's wait till this floating cloud covers the sun. It should be in a short time," said the disciple pointing his finger at the cloud that was heading towards the sun.

But things happened incredibly fast. A swarm of flies gathered on the dab of honey on the grocer's wall. A fat

lizard crawled there and began gobbling up a few of them. The grocer's pet cat which snoozed on a rack suddenly leaped at the lizard and clawed it down.

The lizard, in order to escape the cat, made its way onto the road. The cat pursued it with gusto and was confronted by a growling dog which obviously had some enmity towards it.

As the dog bit the cat, the angry grocer hurled a weighing stone at the dog which struck it on its leg. The dog moaned in pain and its master who was behind it rushed upon the grocer with menacing gestures.

The master of the dog was an influential man and several people came out in his support. The grocer had his own fraternity among the shopkeepers. They came to the grocer's rescue.

Shouts and shrieks soon gave way to a regular fight. Someone put fire to the grocery and it spread to nearby houses.

By the time the Sadhu and his Chela were at a safe distance, the whole village was burning.

"How unpredictable things are!" observed the Sadhu.

"But, Baba, you had predicted the events!" the disciple corrected him.

"No, my son, I did not predict anything. I only spoke of the possibilities that were there. When the atmosphere remains charged with inertia, hatred and violence, any insignificant happening can explode into a riot," explained the Sadhu.

⊠ ⊠ The gross and apparent causes may be pretexts, but are not the real causes of a situation going out of control. Beneath the surface causes remains a state of consciousness, individual or collective, as the case may be.

While a subtle feeling with which the Sadhu was gifted made him feel uneasy in the atmosphere of the village, his intuition might have been behind his fear of an impending disaster. ⊠ ⊠

A Gift for the Queen

A sage camped at the foot of a hill. Those who knew that he was a great soul went to meet him and sought his blessings.

By and by more and more people went to him out of sheer curiosity. "If the sage truly has some spiritual power, maybe his blessings would benefit us. Why not visit him and bow to him? We are not losing anything!"—was their attitude.

The queen of the land too heard about the sage. Her mind was beset with several problems. Once she saw the sage passing by the palace, from her window on the top floor of her palace. There was a serenity on the sage's face that impressed her. She told her chief maid that she would like to meet him.

Next day the queen's chief maid met the sage and conveyed to him the queen's desire to see him. "She is welcome," said the sage.

In the afternoon, riding her bejewelled palanquin, the queen arrived at the foot of the hill and walked into the sage's presence.

She prostrated herself to him. When she lifted her head, the sage held out something for her. She spread her palms and the sage placed on them a gold necklace.

The queen was surprised. She had expected a flower or a fruit or a bit of the sacred ash or a little sandalwood paste. She did not look for any costly present from a hermit. She hesitated; her palms continued to remain unfolded.

"My daughter, are you not a queen? Should I not give you something which befits your status?" the sage said with a smile, as if he had already understood what intrigued the queen.

"But, Baba, I had no desire for receiving a costly gift from you!" murmured the queen.

"What would you like to have?" asked the sage.

The queen had not expected the question. She did not know what to say. "But I have a large number of costly chains!" she muttered.

"That's only natural. Tell me, what would then please you?" the sage asked affectionately.

"Give me something that would help me find God," she said.

"My daughter, if you are looking for God, this necklace should one day give you the clue to that. But continue in your quest. Do not give it up," advised the sage.

The queen was happy. "Baba, should I wear it like any other necklace? Does it require any special attention?" she asked.

"This does require some attention—not very special. Just take it out before you fall asleep and keep it under your pillow. In the morning put it on again, while reminding yourself of your quest," instructed the sage.

The queen took leave of the sage. As days passed, she grew more and more fond of the necklace. There was something very charming about it. That is what she felt, though for all the others there was nothing extraordinary about it. She never forgot to take it off at night and keep it under her pillow. The first thing she did in the morning was to put if on.

One morning she did not find the necklace under her pillow. She looked for it again and again—under the pillow, under the bed and also under the bedstead. She shouted for

her maids. They came rushing and they too looked for it as best as they could. But the search proved futile.

Soon the queen's younger sister was informed about the mysterious disappearance of the necklace. She knew that there was a festive function in the palace at night and the queen had retired to bed very late and very tired. She did what the maids had not dared to do. She examined her elder sister's person and then laughed aloud! Indeed, her guess was correct. The necklace was hanging around her neck! She had neglected taking it off at night.

The queen felt a great relief, for that was so important to her ! Suddenly a question arose in her mind: "Had this incident anything to do with the sage's assurance that the necklace would prove a clue to her quest for God?"

The answer too came at once: "The necklace was with me, still I was looking for it everywhere. God is within me. Must I look for Him somewhere outside?"

The queen began to meditate on this revelation and felt amply rewarded.

Why the Sage Kept Silent

Beside a forest lived a sage. One morning a traveller asked him, "I wish to go to the village on the other side of the river. Which one is the better route—the one that goes through the forest or the one that goes skirting the forest?"

The sage kept quiet. The traveller repeated his question several times, but he did not succeed in eliciting any reply from the sage.

"You fool!" shouted the traveller and went away.

He soon met on the way a mahout who rode an elephant.

"O Brother Mahout, can you tell me the right way to the village beyond the river?" asked the traveller.

"Do you see the narrow track? Follow that. Go up straight by that tall tree on the bank of the river and you will find the village," answered the mahout.

"Thanks, brother. I asked this question to the fellow over there several times, but the fool would not speak!" blurted out the traveller and he took to the way shown by the mahout.

But the mahout felt intrigued. He knew that the man of whom the traveller spoke so contemptuously was a sage. So many people came to him for his advice. What made the traveller brand him a fool?

The mahout was not far from the sage's hut. He got off his elephant and greeted the sage and asked him, "Why did you keep mum when a traveller talked to you a little while ago?"

"Never mind that. That is none of your business," said the sage.

But the mahout insisted in knowing the reason for the sage's queer conduct. The sage had to tell him. The traveller, who was always ready to call others fools was such a fool himself that he would not have correctly understood even as simple a direction as the way to the village. He would have acted wrongly on any advice and would have blamed his adviser.

The mahout got curious. He rode on to see whether the traveller had followed his direction correctly or not.

Half an hour later, nearer the tall tree on the riverbank, he heard an angry shout.. "Look here, you fool, what happened to me because I followed the direction given by you!"

The mahout, to his utter surprise, saw the traveller hanging from the top branch of the tree. He held on to the branch with both his hands, but the branch, on account of his weight, had bent down. Below was the river. The traveller's legs dangled a few feet above the water.

"You asked me to go up by this tree. I climbed it. But I found no way after I reached its top! I would have fallen to my death had 1 not been wise enough to hold on to this branch! Now, would you mind driving your elephant into the river so that I could descend on your shoulder?" suggested the traveller.

The mahout could not have gone away leaving the fellow in that condition! He drove the elephant into the river. But, no sooner had he come under the leaning branch than the elephant, perhaps jolted by that hanging apparition, ran fast to the other bank. The mahout had just caught hold of the traveller's dangling feet in order to help him descend on his shoulder. Now, holding on to the traveller's feet, the mahout too remained suspended over the river.

"You are a real fool. Not only you give wrong advice to others, you can't even keep your own elephant under control!" ranted the traveller.

"Indeed, my friend, 1 am a fool," agreed the mahout with a sigh.

"Now, let us shout for help," proposed the traveller.

"The risk in shouting is, the passers-by who hear us may think that we are attacked either by bandits or by a tiger. They might decide to keep off us," said the mahout.

"In that case, let us sing. That should attract them. Do you know that art?" asked the traveller.

"Even if I knew, I am hardly in a mood to sing," murmured the mahout.

"Than let me do it all alone," said the traveller and he began singing. It was quite agonising for the mahout to bear the fellow's shrieks, over and above the experience of remaining hung holding his feet.

The traveller, upon ending his song, demanded, "You're an absolute moron. Is it not common courtesy to show appreciation for a worthy singer by applauding, like this?"

As the traveller tried to demonstrate how to clap hands, he fell down into the river along with the mahout.

Both had to struggle hard to come ashore. After recovering his breath, the traveller said, "This is a strange world where people keep on doing things so foolishly! I better go back home."

"How wise of you!" said the mahout while riding away—feeling amazed at the sage's insight.

The route in the story is an allegory for the path towards one's destination. A mechanical pursuit of a path is nowhere else more dangerous than in the spiritual field.

Ganja Sanctioned!

A Tantrik Sadhu, worshipper of Mother Kali, was in the habit of smoking *ganja*. Unfortunately, for three days he had no opportunity of enjoying the stuff because he was on a pilgrimage and he came across nobody on the way who would treat him to its intoxicating pleasure.

He sat down under a tree on the bank of a river and began cursing Mother Kali, saying, "How irresponsible it is of you to deprive me of my *ganja,* you naughty girl! If you are the mother and I am your son, my fondness for *ganja* has come to me from you ! How do you fail to provide me with it now? Only if I could find you, I could drag you by the hair and give you a thrashing which you would never forget!"

He went on taking the invisible Divinity to task, calling her names and heaping all sorts of abuses on her.

It so happened that the king's guard was passing by, dragging a thief along. It was an awfully hot summer noon and the guard was in dire need of a dip in the river.

"Sadhu Baba, please keep all eye on this chap," the guard told the Sadhu, tying the thief to the tree, and hurried towards the river.

"I bow to you Sadhu Baba, will you kindly do me a favour? I have in my pocket a bundle of *ganja*. I am already accused of burglary. Now, when the Kotwal will discover *ganja* on my person I will be subjected to more severe punishment. Will you please take it out and throw it or sell it or enjoy it as you please?" the thief told the Sadhu in great earnestness.

The Sadhu was only too happy to oblige the thief.

The guard returned very soon and led the thief away. The Sadhu burst into a loud laugh.

"So my poor mother! You fulfilled my need only when I threatened you with dire consequences! That means I did the right thing! You deserved those abuses!" he said, holding on to his sides.

But, by and by, his face grew pale. "How stern, how severe, how brutal I was towards my poor mother! Woe to me that I caused her so much anguish. She must have got terrified. And with how much difficulty she must have managed to throw my need into my hands! Woe to me, woe to me!" he cried out.

He stood up. "Never shall I have anything to do with the stuff which made me chide my mother!" he said and threw the *ganja* into the river.

⊠⊠ The intimate relationship between the Sadhu of this story and Mother Kali is a fact of life with several cults who look upon the Divine as their mother or daughter. Even a wrong demand upon the deity, made with a certain intensity of faith, may be granted, but there can also be a progress ensured in the seeker's consciousness through this sort of sanction, for along with the sanction comes a touch of Grace.

A version of this story is told by Shri Vijaykrishna Goswami. ⊠⊠

The Guru and the Disciple

The great sage, Akash Dev, was no more. One of his disciples, Megh Dev, had succeeded him to the position of the guru.

Accordingly to the tradition that prevailed in that cult, those who had been initiated by the earlier guru looked upon his successor as their guru. Akash Dev had many disciples. Magh Dev commanded their allegiance. He was now out to initiate more people.

Mandarpur was the village, a prosperous one, where he planned to camp for a week. On behalf of the devotees at Mandarpur, Ramdas had come to him with a formal invitation. For some reason Megh Dev delayed his visit to Mandarpur and Ramdas was detained at the Math.

Someone came from Mandarpur with the bad news that Ramdas's only child, a little boy, was down with severe fever. He had been summoned home urgently.

Ramdas, however, refused to go. "My sacred duty is to accompany the guru. How can I do otherwise?" was the message he sent home.

Another messenger met him the next day to inform him that his son was in a critical condition. But Ramdas was not disturbed. "I don't worry and nobody else need worry either!" was his puzzling message.

Megh Dev set out for Mandarpur on the third day. While he rode a bullock cart, a number of his disciples walked keeping pace with the cart, led by Ramdas.

They were about to enter Mandarpur when a distraught cousin of Ramdas came running and informed him that he had been a bit too late. His son had died an hour ago.

"Don't you worry!" was Ramdas's cryptic comment. The guru reached the village temple where he was to camp. Ramdas saw to it that he had been comfortably lodged before going home.

An air of gloom pervaded the atmosphere of his house. His wife had fainted. Others were crying, seated around the child's dead body.

Ramdas hardly looked at anybody. He picked his dead child and rushed out of the house.

Had he gone mad—wondered those who saw him doing this. Ramdas made a beeline for the guru's camp. Megh Dev sat in a chair talking to several people. In fact, the villagers were reporting him about Ramdas' loss.

Ramdas laid the dead child at his feet, fetched some water in a vessel and obliged the guru to dip his toe in it. He then sprinkled the water on the child and sat down closing his eyes.

Suddenly someone noticed the child opening his eyes and looking at everybody. Exclamations of joy and wonder shook the camp. Dozens of men and women came rushing to see the miracle.

Ramdas alone showed no sign of excitement. "This is but natural!" he said, bowing to Megh Dev. "What is impossible for the guru's Grace?"

Megh Dev's powers became the talk of the region. Hundreds came to have a glimpse of the holy man who could resurrect the dead. The zamindar of the area, who was not a disciple of Megh Dev, personally met him and requested him

to be his guest. Megh Dev, after some show of reluctance, agreed to oblige him.

Megh Dev's camp shifted to the zamindar's abode. He was much more comfortable there. The zamindar toyed with the idea of becoming formally his disciple.

Megh Dev sat in *Padmasana* in the morning when the zamindar's son, a toddler, crawled on to his lap. Megh Dev tried to ward off the disturbing element and concentrate again. But the naughty child gave a tuck to his beard and giggled.

That instantly drove Megh Dev into a state of rage. He hurled the child as if it was a cockroach and the child's head dashed against the wall and it fainted.

A maid-servant who witnessed this alerted the zamindar's wife. She came running and lifted the child and, as the child did not respond to her fond calls, gave out a wail. The zamindar himself and his entire household gathered on the spot. The physician lived the next door. He was summoned. He examined the child and declared it dead!

Megh Dev who knew all that was happening but pretended to be in a trance, at last opened his eyes.

"Why this hullabaloo?" he asked.

The zamindar, with folded hands, said, "Sir, my naughty little son was duly punished for disturbing your meditation. But it is high time you restore him to life."

"Hm! Bring a little water," commanded Megh Dev.

The servants were ready with it.

A silver vessel was put before the holy man. He dipped his toe in it.

"Now, sprinkle it on the boy," he instructed.

His instruction was followed.

Water was sprinkled on the boy not once but several times, but to no avail. Surprise was writ large on the faces of those waiting with bated breath to see the miracle.

Water was brought once again—and this time in a bigger vessel. Megh Dev sank both his feet in it. Then the vessel was emptied on the boy. But nothing happened.

The zamindar goggled his eyes and demanded of Megh Dev, "What's the matter?"

Megh Dev hemmed and hawed.

"Revive my child, I say, or else ....," the zamindar was assuming a fearful stance.

Out of the crowd emerged Ramdas. He stood between the zamindar and Megh Dev and next knelt down and, touching Megh Dev's feet, said imploringly, "O Guru, please slacken the rigours of your test of the ignorant people like us. Who can pass it without your Grace?"

Somebody brought another vessel full of water. Ramdas made Megh Dev's toe touch it. He then sprinkled the water on the child, tears rolling down his cheeks. He shut his eyes and kept sitting. There was absolute silence. In a few moments the child's heart resumed beating. He fluttered open his eyes. Her mother took him to her breast and ran away from the scene.

The crowd that had collected again sang Megh Dev's glory. The zamindar alone was not sure. In any case he did not proceed to enrol himself as Megh Dev's disciple.

But the one who was absolutely sure of Megh Dev's worthlessness was Megh Dev himself.

▩ ▩ When the guru is a realised soul, the disciples are lucky. But the real guru is the Divine. He can work through a human guru even when the latter is quite unworthy of that position. What activates Grace is the devotee's unqualified faith. ▩ ▩

Enlightened Overnight

The good old zamindar had a guru. Once every year the guru would honour the zamindar by camping in his house for a few days.

The old zamindar was no more. His son, the young Kishore Chowdhury, was not known to have much interest in matters spiritual. Nevertheless, he put up a show of devotion for the father's guru whenever the latter chose to pay a visit to his house.

Kishore Chowdhury's wife, Lakshmi, however, loved and adored the old guru deeply. Perhaps that was the reason for the guru continuing to visit them.

The guru gave a discourse to the devotees every time. Kishore Chowdhury rarely attended it.

Once, however, Chowdhury was present during a discourse when the guru was explaining the concept of Advaita or Monism. Lakshmi was pleasantly surprised to observe her husband listening to the discourse with great attention.

The guru said, "In an englightened state of mind one does not differentiate between a prince and a pauper, or between a bar of gold and a clod of clay. He sees the presence of the One in everything. He loves and adores the One in all."

The young Chowdhury inched nearer the guru. Indeed, his face recorded an unusual glow.

Was her husband verging on enlightenment? Lakshmi wondered for a moment.

But she received a jolt in the evening when, on entering her husband's room, she saw him embracing their new maid, Leela.

At night she took her husband to task for his conduct.

"Ah, Lakshmi, I never knew that you were so unenlightened. It seems the guru's words fell on deaf ears so far as you are concerned ! For me, I do not differentiate between yourself and Leela, that is the state of mind in which I am!" replied Chowdhury with a smile.

Lakshmi sighed and kept quiet.

The guru walked in when Chowdhury had just sat down for dinner.

"I'm so happy to learn that you have grown enlightened!" the guru commented. "You don't differentiate between one thing and another!''

"It is all your blessings, guruji!" said Chowdhury, feeling quite flattered. Then, looking at Lakshmi, he asked if the guru had already had his dinner.

"O yes, I have finished with mine. You may go ahead with yours."

Chowdhury picked up an item that looked like a cake and clamped his teeth on it. His face showed surprise and displeasure.

"What's this?" he asked Lakshmi.

"A cake!"

"But it tastes like cow-dung!"

"It is cow-dung, of course, only baked!"

Chowdhury sprang up. "What do you mean by offering me a cow-dung cake?" he shouted.

"Look here, young man, it was at my instance that she did so," the guru intervened. "I told her that her husband had obviously reached a stage when he cannot differentiate between cheese-cake and cow-dung cake. He has grown enlightened!"

Chowdhury stood still, speechless.

The guru patted him on the back. "My son! It is easy to cite a doctrine but not easy to realise it. Worse still, it is easy to indulge in wrong things in the name of an ideal. You will earn the right to say that you don't find any difference between Lakshmi and Leela only when you find no difference between cheese-cake and cow-dung, between gold and clay. And if you have reached that stage, you will have no attachments—either for this or that."

Chowdhury nodded.

Handling the Wishing Cup

The old merchant, on his death-bed, told his guru, "Master, the heir I'm leaving behind is a fool. Only your kindness can save him from ruining himself totally."

"You've worried enough about your heir. This is hardly the time to harp on the same issue. Think of the Divine now," advised the guru.

The merchant kept quiet, but not for long. "Master, unless you promise help for my son, I cannot die in peace," he mumbled.

"You know very well that my help is only for those who have some seeking for Truth. You had that seeking in your heart. However, for your sake I promise to help your son once—only once when he would be in difficulty. Now, my friend, leave him to his Karma and think of something worthwhile," said the guru.

The merchant smiled. Anxiety disappeared from his face. He died in peace.

The guru went away to his abode in the forest.

The merchant's son was not only foolish but also selfish. Because of the first trait he heavily lost in his business; because of the second trait in his character nobody came forward to help him, for he had no friends!

A gang of rogues, of course, pretended to be his friends. Needless to say, his loss was their gain.

The young man knew of the promise the father's guru had made. He reached the old hermit's dwelling in the forest.

The guru had no interest in hearing his long story. He gave him a cup and said, "This is a Wishing Cup. As long as you lead a good life, this will give you anything you wish of it."

"I will lead a good life. Give me some other advice."

"You don't need any more advice. What I've just told you should be enough."

"Sir, it was not easy to travel all the way to reach your abode. Must I go back with one advice only? Give me more!"

"Do not drink wine."

"Thank you. I don't drink. And what's the next advice?"

"Why do you need more advice?" the guru showed his unhappiness.

"Sir, I lost my lunch for the sake of meeting you. Must I return with two advice only?"

"Do not gamble."

"Thanks. One more advice and I will go back satisfied."

"Do not speak lies," said the guru with a gesture indicating that the young man should now leave him.

The young man stood up. "Sir, what will happen if I fail to abide by any of your advice?" he asked.

"The Wishing Cup may crack up and cease to work."

The young man left for home. Within minutes he was a rich man. He took care not to ask the Cup for too much wealth at one time lest he lost his gain to burglars. But, with the Wishing Cup he had nothing to worry about.

On the very second day he knew that he was speaking lies as usual. He was afraid that the Cup will crack up.

He examined it carefully. Luckily, it showed no cracks!

He occasionally gambled. But for the sake of the safety of the Cup, he avoided going to the den for a fortnight. One

day his pals pleaded with him to participate in a special gambling spree and he thought, "If my speaking lies did not damage the Cup, why should an occasional participation in gambling do so?"

He gambled and lost heavily. But it mattered little, for he had with him the Wishing Cup to make good any loss!

He entered the secret chamber in which the Cup was and was happy to see that it had not cracked—even though he had gambled!

After the gambling session there was food and drink. The one thing good with the young man was he did not drink. But now he thought, "If the Cup remained intact even after my speaking lies and gambling, it will remain intact even if I drink! Why to be deprived of this pleasure?"

He drank and drank heavily. Then he went to examine the Cup. No, it had not cracked up. He was happy, so happy that he flung it up in order to catch it. That is how he wished to pay his tribute to the Cup.

But his legs and hands were unsteady. He could not catch it. It fell on the floor and was shattered to pieces.

He was too drunk to understand it. He fell into a swoon. In the morning he understood that he had been reduced to misery.

The report reached the guru in due course. "Had he not been greedy for more advice, he would not have thought of violating the condition regarding drinking, because he never drank. But greedy by nature, he was greedy even to have more advice. Then he was greedy to see how many conditions he can break and still enjoy the benefit of the Wishing Cup!" commented the guru.

A Windfall of Luck

The sage, Vishnudev had lived in a forest on the banks of a river for sixty years. At his Ashram he imparted lessons in Yoga and Spirituality to worthy disciples for more than half a century. Before him the place had been the seat of his guru.

Now he had decided to close down the Ashram and depart for some destination in the Himalayas which he would not disclose. He had sent the last group of his disciples away. Only his chief disciple and spiritual protege, Bhaktananda, and two or three of those who served him, were still with him.

"My son, before I go away, I must dissolve some of the occult formations which have been here in the atmosphere over the years. We have to perform a few rites. I need your help," the sage told Bhaktananda.

"I am at your disposal, Master!" said Bhaktananda.

"You know, dear Bhakta, this is the banyan tree under which my guru had performed a certain penance, at the end of which he could have received all the boons a man of the world would prize—youthfullness, wealth and power. Needless to say, he believed that if he was rich with these qualities, he could serve humanity better. But just before he was to obtain the *siddhi,* he changed his mind. All that he was required to do was to light a *Yajna* and utter the last hymn and offer a handful of a certain stuff into the flames and the boons—whatever he wanted—would have come to him. But he abandoned his plan. The occult formations, however, are still here. He left it to me to

complete the rite and receive the boons. But I had no inspiration for them. Do you know what the hymn is and what is the stuff to be offered to the flames?"

"What are they, Master?"

The sage whispered the answer into Bhaktananda's ears. Then he said, "My son, should you like to obtain the *siddhi* for which everything was prepared by my guru, you can do what is necessary. If you are not inclined to gain the *siddhi,* you must perform here the dissolution ceremony which I had taught you on another occasion. The same ceremony dissolves all the occult formations."

"Guru, why did you not dissolve the formation yourself?" asked Bhaktananda.

"Just as my guru had kept it alive in order to give me a chance to utilise the formation, I also decided to transfer the chance to you. But it is up to you to utilise it or dissolve it," said the guru.

That very night the guru left the place.

Next day Bhaktananda stood under the banyan tree, ready to perform the ceremony to dissolve the formation when his *gurubhai,* Kusumakar, sprang before him. Kusumakar had served the guru well and had achieved much. Just as Bhaktananda's speciality was in seeing the future of a person, if he wished to see, Kusumakar's speciality was in curing people of diseases.

"Bhakta!" called out Kusumakar, "I overheard the dialogue between the guru and you which took place under this banyan tree yesterday."

"Did you overhear? That explains why the guru whispered a few things to me. I wondered why he should suddenly lower his voice when nobody was around to hear us!" observed Bhaktananda.

"Bhakta, what are you going to do with the hymn and the secret the guru gave you?"

"I'm going to dissolve the formation," said Bhaktananda.

"Please don't do so. Let me make use of the *siddhi.* As you know, I am a physician. To cure people is my dharma. If I am endowed with those qualities, I can serve the people better. I will bring happiness to thousands over the years to come," Kusumakar pleaded in earnestness.

"Kusumakar, why do you think had our guru and his guru refrained from realising that *siddhi*?"

"I don't know."

"And, why do you think this friend of yours is unwilling to realise that *siddhi* either?"

"I don't know. But I know this much that if I realise the *siddhi,* I will make the best use of it," asserted Kusumakar.

"Kusumakar, youth, wealth, power—such are the elements through which *Prakriti* keeps our souls under bondage; is that right?"

"Right. But one can, after all, turn these very causes of one's bondage into opportunities to serve the *Purusha*—the awakened soul."

"One can, in principle. But there is a gulf of difference between what is possible in principle and what is practicable. Our guru and his guru were pure spiritual seekers. They must have realised that the *siddhi* in question would either disturb their spiritual pursuit or prove worthless so far as such pursuits are concerned. Must you be so eager to know the secret?" cautioned Bhaktananda.

"Look here, my friend, they just did not care. If the *siddhi* were fraught with any danger, the guru would not pass on its clue to you, would he?"

"The knowledge of the clue is necessary to dissolve the formation. Had he really wished me to have the *siddhi,* he would have straightaway asked me to perform the last rite and have it."

"Let us not argue about it. The guru's guru devoted so much of his time and yogic energy to secure the *siddhi.* Let

not his endeavour go waste. My friend, have you forgotten your promise to me?" Kusumakar played his last card.

Bhaktananda had not forgotten. That was years ago. Both the boys had just reached the Ashram. They were yet to be initiated by the guru. One day Bhaktananda was about to step on a cobra when Kusumakar gave him a push and saved him from the cobra's wrath. Bhaktananda, moved by gratitude, had said that he would give Kusumakar anything he asked for, provided it was within his capacity to give it.

After yet another hour of persuasion by Kusumakar, Bhaktananda imparted him the secret of the *siddhi.*

Next day Kusumakar sat under the banyan tree, lighted a fire and offered the necessary stuff into it and uttered the hymn and asked the *siddhi* for the descent of which his guru's guru had paved the path.

The flames grew bright and he heard a voice that was inaudible to anybody else: "Ask for any three boons!"

"Grant me that I will never grow old."

"Granted. Next?"

"Grant me that I will have all the wealth I desire!"

"Granted. Next?"

"That I will have more power than a king's!"

"Granted, and that is all."

The flames subsided and went out.

Kusumakar felt a surge of joy within. He will never grow old—and will have all the wealth he would desire and all the power! He laughed and laughed.

That attracted his solitary friend in the forest, Bhaktananda. "Is the rite over?" asked Bhaktananda.

"Over. I thank you very much," said Kusumakar and he laughed again. There was no serenity in that laughter, but the usual intoxication and arrogance that come with any big worldly success.

Bhaktananda looked grave. "Kusumakar, what are the boons you sought?" he asked.

Kusumakar told him.

Bhaktananda's eyes moistened as he looked at his friend.

"Why? Was there anything wrong with my boons?" queried Kusumakar.

"What would you do with all these boons? Why did you not ask for a long life so that you could make use of the other boons?"

"But I asked for youth—that I would never grow old!"

Bhaktananda smiled the saddest ever smile. "My friend, that is true. You will never grow old. You know that I can see the future if I wish to. A desire to see your future just now overwhelmed me and I saw that....',

"What did you see? Don't I have a long enough life?"

"You don't have a future at all. In fact...." Bhaktananda had not completed his sentence when Kusumakara collapsed. He was dead.

He never grew old!

The Fasting Devotees

The sky was overcast with dark clouds. The wind was growing cooler and fiercer.

But where was the boatman? The small crowd of devotees, eager to reach the shrine on the other side of the river, was getting restive. "O brother boatman, where are you?" some of them shouted again and again till their voices cracked.

No wonder that they were at the end of their patience, for they had fasted for the whole day. They could end their vow and eat only after offering their final Puja to the deity.

There was a hillock on the riverbank. Atop it, in a cave, lived a hermit. Since the boat was yet to arrive, some of the devotees had climbed the hill and greeted the hermit with gifts of bananas, *laddus* and coconuts. The hermit ate them with relish. The devotees were happy, for, by pleasing a holy man they had added a few extra marks to the merit they had earned through their fasting on that holy day.

At last the boat arrived, the devotees hurriedly boarded it and the senior ones among them took the boatman to task for his delayed arrival.

"Don't you ever look at the sky? What if it rains while we are in the river?" they asked.

"What do you mean by if it rains? Rain is certain. May be even a storm. I'm not going to ply the boat," said the boatman.

The devotees were in a dilemma. They were awfully hungry. But ending the fast without visiting the shrine would mean wasting the penance. They pleaded with the boatman

to ply the boat as fast as he could. "Don't you realise our condition? We are fasting," they said.

"Should I speak the truth? But unpalatable it would be. None of you have fasted. Had you truly fasted, the climate could not be hostile towards you," said the boatman.

"Do you take us for liars? We have fasted to fulfil our own vows. Why should we pretend and before whom should we pretend?" demanded the passengers.

"Pardon me, my good friends, but a man lies to himself and pretends before himself more than before others."

"We know that a mere boatman by profession though you are, you are wise. But you really puzzle us. Don't you believe us when we declare that we are fasting?"

"You have eaten much. Your bellies are full. But I don't wish to argue with you. Go and fetch a true devotee, a man who is truly fasting. May be nature will be kind if such a man is in the boat along with you fellows," said the boatman. His gesture conveyed his uncompromising mood.

The passengers were in a fix. They had gone without even a morsel of food. But the boatman does not believe them. What assurance is there that he would believe another fasting man even if they succeeded in finding one?

Probably the boatman had a hunch of their misgivings. "Well, try to persuade the hermit on the hillock to accompany you. That may work," he advised.

The devotees knew that the hermit was not fasting. In fact, they had seen him eating what they gave him. However, they were anxious to satisfy the boatman.

Some of them met the hermit. "Holy man, will you mind crossing the river with us? This being an auspicious day, we would feel blessed in your company," they said.

Without uttering a word the hermit descended and boarded the boat. The boat left the shore. The clouds began to disperse and the force of the wind subsided.

Once the passengers had disembarked at the ghat leading to the shrine, the boatman brought the hermit back to his shore and again went back to wait for the devotees.

The ritual over, the devotees feasted in the nearby food-shops and boarded the boat. Midway, now that the boatman was his old simple self, a passenger told him, "You surprised us. I have guests in my house and my wife cooked delicious items for them. All I did was smell their fragrance, but never touched even a morsel of them. Yet you did not believe me!"

Said another, "Indeed, brother, your attitude was shocking. My totally empty tummy was in a state of revolt. I assured it of hot *dosas* and *jilebis* available at the shop behind the shrine and made it wait. But you were sure I was not fasting!"

A third voice—and a laughing one—broke in. "The irony is, the hermit who, according to you, was fasting, had been fed by myself!"

The boatman heard the comments in silence. Then he began, "Well, gentlemen, you have already answered the first question raised by yourselves. You were not fasting but were only waiting to eat. Your attention was on the items of which you had deprived yourselves, not on your vow. Hence, your vow and your fasting were false. I know the hermit, he does not pretend fasting; but he does not have any greed for food either. He is continuously in a state of vow. Hence, his company spared you the risk of facing a storm."

The boat reached the shore. Some of the passengers were sensible enough to offer Namaskars to the boatman before taking leave of him and going to convey their gratitude to the hermit.

⊠⊠ Vows have their justification only when they have behind them a consciousness befitting them. A mechanical observance of a rite has no value. On the other hand, one who is liberated from all bondage to greed and lust, is free from the need of observing rituals. ⊠⊠

The Location of Paradise

"Sir, is there a paradise?" Vraja, the young disciple, asked the Master for the umpteenth time. At last said the venerable guru, "Must you know?"

"Yes, Master, yes!" said the disciple most eagerly. He straightened up and inched closer to the guru and pricked his ears.

"Well, my first disciple, Hemchandra, is in paradise," said the guru and he closed his eyes for meditation. The disciple knew that the guru will not open his eyes for a long time. He ran from one disciple to another and tried to find out the way to Hemchandra's abode.

Most of the disciples were ignorant of Hemchandra's abode. But a senior attendant of the guru said, "I know where he is, though I have never been there. He described the way to his abode when he was here five years ago."

Vraja made the man recollect what Hemchandra had said. A thousand miles away, beyond a range of hills and an icy river was situated the valley which was Hemchandra's home. There was no human locality there; rarely a hamlet greeted a traveller even on the way to the valley.

But Vraja was determined to find the valley—for it was paradise!

"Master, I wish to pay a visit to Hemchandra," Vraja told his guru the next day. The guru was too absorbed in his

thoughts to relate Vraja's desire to visit Hemchandra to his search for paradise.

"Why not, my boy," he said.

Vraja was out on the street before long. He walked as fast as he could for the first few days. Then the way became difficult, full of rocks and thorny meadows. His pace grew slower. Before climbing the range of mountains, he had to collect enough food to carry with him, for there was no

human habitation thereafter. The burden tired him. Crossing the icy river exhausted him almost to death!

It took him a full hundred days to reach the last hill before the valley. Despite his tiredness, he was excited as he climbed the hill. He was going to behold paradise!

He stood on the hill-top and looked at the valley and sighed. It was an ordinary place. There were some trees and bushes and a sparkling rivulet. But he had seen numerous places far more charming than this!

In a corner of the valley stood Hemchandra's hut, a humble dwelling. Hemchandra was happy to meet this young disciple of his guru. He entertained Vraja to the best of his ability, but Vraja was hardly pleased. Hemchandra had some boiled roots and some common varieties of fruits for his food. Vraja learnt that both the summer and the winter were quite severe there.

And this place the guru called paradise!

After a week's sojourn, which was necessary for recuperating his lost strength, Vraja left the 'paradise'.

Another hundred days of strenuous walk and he was back with his guru.

"Master, you had said that Hemchandra was in paradise. But what I saw was the most ordinary place!" he reported.

"Was that so?" the guru kept silent for a moment.

"My boy, had you been a little more explicit with your intention at the time of your departure, I would have told you the truth."

"What is the truth, Sir?"

"The truth is, Hemchandra is not in paradise, the paradise is in Hemchandra."

Gold for Happiness

"My son, your money is meant for you; you are not meant for your money," the sage told Laghuchand, one of his devotees who, he knew, was an archmiser. He went on accumulating money, but was most reluctant to spend even a penny. Once when a single coin tucked in a fold of his cloth slipped off, he skipped a meal to compensate for the loss. He never gave anything in charity or as alms and he never entertained any guest.

The sage was camping in the village for a few days and the miser met him everyday, once in the morning and once again in the evening. But everybody knew that he did not do so out of any devotion for the sage, but in some way to profit from him in a gross way—if that was possible.

"I never see you smile. Why?" one day the sage asked Laghuchand.

"What is there to smile about, Master? The world is full of crooks. I work so hard, but do I get enough to justify my labour?" he protested.

"My son, you get much more than you deserve. There are innumerable people who work harder than you—but receive little, not even enough to make both ends meet. Yet, they laugh and are happier than you. It is a question of attitude to life. Your sole aim in life has been to gather wealth. But man has far, far more meaningful purposes to live for. How many times should I remind you about it?"

The sage's words fell on deaf ears, even though Laghuchand nodded.

The sage visited the village once every two or three years, because most of the villagers were his devotees and he bore in his heart deep love for them. On one of his visits he took ill. The villagers grew very anxious about his health and they summoned the best physicians of the region. But the sage told them, "I am about to leave my body. My blessings are with all of you. Most of you seek happiness. Your trust in God alone will set you free from your anxieties and tensions and make it possible for you to gain happiness. However, should you wish to avail of my help in solving any of your personal problems, you can meet me, for the last time, one after another."

The villagers were shocked at the sage's sudden announcement. They sighed and wept. And when they went to meet him one by one, all they sought was his blessings. They had no heart to bother him with their problems.

Laghuchand came last of all. "O Master, I crave your indulgence. Promise that you'll grant me my prayers."

By then the sage probably wished to be left alone. He promised as requested by Laghuchand, obviously in order to get rid of him quickly.

"O great soul, one of your old personal attendants had confided to me that you know the secret of changing iron into gold. Kindly pass on that charm to me," said Laghuchand.

The dying sage's face paled. "Woe to me that I know that secret. But I tell you, so far as you are concerned, the secret may deprive you of whatever peace and happiness you have. Better ask me for something that would do you real good," the sage almost pleaded with Laghuchand.

"O Master, I assure you that peace and happiness will be mine only if I come to know that secret. More the gold, more will be my happiness.

The sage had no time to waste. He taught him a short hymn which one should repeat a hundred times placing one's hands on the iron which one desired to change into gold.

Before long the sage died. The miser Laghuchand seemed to be the happiest among all his devotees. Some of the them whispered among themselves: "The sage must have taught him something great; may be the fellow has received the boon to behold God!"

After some days Laghuchand decided to put the hymn to effect. He went to a scrap iron dealer for buying a lot of that stuff. But the price of scrap in the market was a few paisa more per measure than usual.

"I can wait till the price comes down! Why to lose money buying it at the wrong time?" he told himself.

But the price did not come down before two years. At last when it did, Laghuchand bought a cartful of scrap iron and arranged for it to be carried into his well-protected bedroom.

At night, when all was quiet, Laghuchand locked the doors of his room and placed his hands on the heap of iron.

But then, suddenly his eyes bulged; he began to sweat, he murmured some nonsense. What had happened was, he had clean forgotten the hymn meanwhile!

He scratched his head. Then he began to curse himself. His shrieks attracted his sons, daughters and others in the neighbourhood. They broke open the door and dragged him out.

"You thieves, I'll kill you if you touch my gold!" he yelled pointing at the heap of scrap iron.

His hands had to be tied. He died a mad man.

Happiness is a state of consciousness and it hardly depends on external factors. When the consciousness is wretched, no external opportunity is going to help. What is more, it is unsafe to exploit the goodwill of a sage for satisfaction of one's greed.

The Transformed Soil

Jagadish Verma, the renowned businessman, was on a visit to Mathura—not for pilgrimage, but for striking a deal with a trader. He was returning to his town by boat. He was accompanied by his assistant, Shekhar.

A bullock-cart was waiting for him at the *ghat*. Shekhar and the cartel put his luggage in the cart. Verma was about to board it when he seemed to remember something.

"What a mistake I made!" he murmured to himself.

"What was it, Sir?" asked Shekhar.

"Never mind," said Verma. "Wait a minute," he instructed Shekhar and walked towards the canal. He was back after a few minutes, holding what looked like a pouch.

On reaching home, Verma told Shekhar, "Carry this small parcel to auntie Champawati. Just tell her that I brought it for her. She will understand. You need not say a word more."

Shekhar was faithful to his master. He carried the parcel—a handful of earth in a hankerchief—to Champawati Devi.

Champawati Devi was a widow, belonging to a noble family, respected by all. She loved Verma like her son.

"My child Jagadish is back, is he?" exclaimed the old lady while receiving the small parcel. "How conscientious of him to remember my small demand amidst all his business !"

She lifted the parcel for it to touch her forehead and said again, "When I heard about his proposed visit to Mathura, I asked him to bring a handful of earth from the bed of the sacred river Yamuna. He did not neglect to do my bidding.

Well, what could be more precious for me than the soil of the Yamuna!"

The lady poured the earth into a silver casket. A drop of her tear fell on the earth.

Shekhar shivered with embarrassment and a sense of guilt. He alone knew that Verma had forgotten to collect any earth from Mathura. He remembered about it only while boarding the cart and went back hurriedly and picked up some earth from the canal bank and put it in his handkerchief.

Shekhar knew that Verma was an atheist. He laughed at people's faith in God and at the rituals they performed. But he was an honest and upright man so far as his career as a businessman was concerned. He had considered the lady's request as infantile. It was enough to satisfy her—he believed. He never thought that the soil of Yamuna had anything special about it or it could really do the lady any good.

Shekhar consoled himself with the thought that after all he had not lied to Champawati Devi. He had only performed an errand.

Time rolled on. Champawati Devi died. Verma retired from his business. Shekhar too had retired, but he continued to be Verma's confidant.

Champawati Devi's grandson had been married to Verma's daughter. Once Verma took ill. His condition deteriorated. His son-in-law, Champawati Devi's grandson, was a gifted physician. He and Shekhar did their best to pull Verma out of his physical predicament.

But one day, the physician told Shekhar, "Uncle, I've given up hope. Nothing is working. Vermaji is sinking."

Suddenly he seemed to remember something. "Uncle, please be here. I will be back soon."

He returned with a small bottle and he poured its content into the patient's mouth.

Verma showed signs of recovery—and he fully recovered in a few days.

One day, while Shekhar and the physician were on their way to a friend's house, the physician said, "Uncle! Strange things do happen, after all! Do you know what saved my father-in-law? My grandma had passed on to me a silver casket, with the message that it contained some sacred soil. She had cured several ailing people, mixing a pinch of the soil with water and making them drink it! When I was sure that my medicine was not going to save my father-in-law, I decided to try Grandma's prescription—and it worked!"

Shekhar gave a start. He knew the nature of that soil. But he also realised that it had been transformed into something truly sacred by the drop of tear shed on it by Champawati Devi—the tear of deep faith, love and gratitude.

Tears came to Shekhar's eyes. "My son!" he told the physician, "please remember my earnest request. Never tell Vermaji anything about the mystery of his cure. Please do not ask me why!"

"I agree!" said the physician.

▩▩ Can undiluted faith charge something ordinary with a special power? The story suggests that the old lady's faith, through her tear, rendered a qualitative elevation to an ordinary stuff, at last—and ironically—benefitting even the man who thought nothing of it! ▩▩

The Sinner

The dark night had grown darker because of rain. The village Rangoli, lay supine under the threats of lightning and thunder.

The sage and his disciple had managed to reach Rangoli before it started to rain, but had not been able to cross the river. It was, however, imperative for the sage to reach his destination beyond the river that very night.

Several families in that prosperous village owned boats. The sage and his disciple met them one after another, requesting them to help them cross the river. But none agreed to ply a boat in that stormy weather.

They had reached the end of the village. A young man came out of the last house—a small hut. "Sir!", he said, looking at the sage, "I am new to this place. I have settled down recently and own no boat. But I know where the water is not quite deep. If you have no objection to it. I can carry both of you, one after the other, on my shoulders, and cross the river."

The sage agreed to his proposal.

After leaving the disciple on the other shore, the young man, Manohar by name, carried the sage on his shoulders. As soon as the sage alighted, he muttered as if to himself, "Amazing!"

"What is amazing?" the disciple asked Manohar.

"For quite some time I have been feeling a sort of heaviness in my head—as if I carried an invisible burden. The

moment the sage sat on me, I was free from that cursed burden. But it returned to me as soon as he alighted!" replied Manohar.

The sage heard it, but said nothing.

The two reached their destination, the zamindar's house. In the morning the zamindar heard all about their ordeal and adventure in their bid to cross the river. He was extremely pleased with Manohar. He handed over a letter to

the sage's disciple and told him, "My manager is camping at Rangoli. Please give him this letter. He will pay a hundred rupees as reward to Manohar. Both of you can congratulate the young man on my behalf."

The disciple, before setting out for Rangoli, asked the sage, "Sir! What is the mystery of Manohar feeling the weight of an invisible burden which left him only to come back?"

"The fellow has a history of wickedness behind him. He feels the burden of his sins!" explained the sage. "When I sat on his shoulders, that burden left him temporarily," he added.

Ten years later, once again the sage and his disciple reached Rangoli on their way to the zamindar's house. They had no problem in crossing the river because the zamindar's boat was waiting for them. However, they enquired about Manohar.

"Which Manohar you are curious about, Sir—Manohar the farmer, Manohar the money-lender or Manohar the sinner?"

"Manohar who lived in a hut at the end of the village, near the river-bank!" said the sage.

"That is Manohar the sinner. He has a better house to live in now, but you can find him in his shop—near that banyan tree," the people informed the sage.

"Are you looking for Manohar the sinner?" two or three others asked them when they were near the shop. Manohar came out of his shop and bowed to the sage. After some pleasantries, the sage observed, "I'm sure, that vexing sensation of some invisible burden resting on your head has disappeared!"

"Yes, O noble soul, it gradually became lighter and was gone totally. I have no doubt that it is your blessings that did the miracle!"

"Thank this disciple of mine," said the sage in a very low voice. Manohar failed to hear the comment, but it did not escape the disciple's ears.

The two boarded the boat. The disciple could no longer contain his curiosity. "Sir, how am I responsible for the disappearance of Manohar's strange sensation? I am intrigued!"

"Well, his burden of sin got distributed among the people of Rangoli. You too got a bit of it!"

"I'm at a loss to understand you, Sir!" The disciple sounded perplexed.

"Look here, the other day you learnt the mystery of his sensation from me. You must have disclosed it to the zamindar's manager.

"He must have told some others in the village about it, so that Manohar came to be known as Manohar the sinner. My son, strange are the laws of the occult world. All those who referred to him as the sinner, unwittingly pinched a little of his burden. By and by he became free!"

"Strange!" commented the disciple with a sigh.

When people gleefully point their fingers at others' sins, little do they realise that they do so out of a secret attraction for the sin. Their hatred of the sinner is often tinged with an element of envy—for the sinner had gained something instead of their gaining it!

And what finally makes them share the sinner's burden is their vanity in passing a judgement on him and keeping it alive, thereby going on punishing him. While the sinner, thus punished, loses his burden the punishers, who may not be potentially different from him, are punished for their cruelty.

A Revelation for the Thief

A young and ambitious thief was repeatedly successful in his nocturnal adventures in village.

At last, however, the people began to look at him with suspicion. Partly to avoid being caught and partly driven by ambition, one day he reached the town and decided to apply his skills on the royal palace itself at night.

But the palace, unlike his targets in the villages, was well-guarded. He had hardly come out of the palace scaling the wall when he was given a hot chase. He was obliged to throw down his booty and run for life. The guards recovered the booty, but did not give up the chase.

The thief crossed the locality and entered a hilly area on the outskirts of the town. He knew that the distance between him and his pursuers was rapidly reducing. He was exhausted.

He saw a cave. A lamp was burning inside it. But nobody was there. He entered it and, locating a piece of ochre cloth hanging on the wall, pulled it and covered himself with it.

He heard foot-steps outside the cave. His only fear was, the pursuers could suspect him when they observed him panting.

Two guards peeped in. The thief sat in lotus pose, closing his eyes.

"Oh, the hermit is doing *Pranayama!*" observed one of the guards. Then both of them bowed to him and quietly retreated.

The thief did not tarry there, as he feared the return of the cave-dwelling hermit any moment. Cautiously he crossed over to the other side of the hills. There, on the banks of the sacred Ganga, he came across an Ashram and spent the remaining hours of the night lying down on the verandah of one of the Ashram houses.

When it was dawn, the young Brahmacharis of the Ashram descended into the river for bathing and reciting Gayatri—the hymn to the rising sun. He followed suit.

Then they sat on the river-bank meditating. The thief too sat with them.

Just then some royal officers were seen talking to the sage who headed the Ashram. The thief was in panic. However, he could not try to escape them.

"My dear boys!" the sage spoke addressing his young disciples. "For some mysterious reason, our king has been advised by the astrologers to wed his daughter to a young hermit, instead of to any prince. The first one among you to agree to the proposal will be chosen for the purpose."

The guru waited. But none showed any sign of readiness to accept the offer. The royal officials walked past them, disappointment writ large on their foreheads, and stopped in front of the thief, the last young man. "Sir, wouldn't you oblige us?" asked their spokesman.

The thief stood up. The royal messengers were very happy. They led him to the palace in a bejewelled palanquin.

The king received him with great show of love.

"My lord," said the thief gravely. "I've come here not to receive the hand of the princess, but to receive punishment from your hands."

To the surprised king, he then spoke in detail all that he had done.

"My lord, throw me into the dungeon for any length of time you please. After I am released, I will mould my life as

a seeker of God. If mere pretention to be a devotee of God could earn me respect from the guards who were pursuing me and could bring close to marrying the princess, I wonder what rewards await one when one sincerely, truly pursues the pathway to God!" he said.

The king understood and wished him the best.

⊠⊠ The eternal recognition and respect the seeker of God receives are only an indication of the inner rewards—the splendours of consciousness that awaits him. The story also suggests that we can never know the inner state of a man from his outer habits. One may mature even when his outward conduct gives no indication of such a growth. ⊠⊠

While God Waits

"O Lord, I feel like laughing when sages and philosophers speak of Maya with some awe. There must be some truth in their fear, but Maya surely cannot put everybody under its spell!" One day Narada observed while walking with Vishnu on one of their occasional visits to Earth. Needless to say, they looked like ordinary mortals.

"I'm too thirsty to answer," was Vishnu's brief comment. He sat down under a tree as if terribly tired and looked wistfully at the river flowing beyond a stretch of bushy meadow.

"Wait a moment and I'll fetch water for you," said Narada. He walked briskly towards the river. Plucking a few leaves and thorns, he improvised a cup, entered the river and stood knee-deep in the water. It was indeed refreshingly cool. He leaned forward to fill the cup.

"O weary traveller!" the voice, extremely inviting, surprised Narada. He straightened up and looked at the shore. There stood a beautiful maiden, with a water-filled jar under her arm. "The water there is rather muddy, unfit for drinking. If you care to follow me to my house yonder, I will serve you with clean water," said the maiden, smiling bashfully.

She turned and started to walk. Narada followed her.

"You can throw away the leaf-cup. We have our tumblers!" the maiden said softly, looking over her shoulder and displaying yet another flash of bewitching smile.

Her parents received Narada with sincere affection and served him a sumptuous lunch and offered a cozy bed for his rest. Narada lay down for a siesta, but soon passed into a slumber. It was evening by the time he woke up.

"My son, you still look tired, even though you are relaxed. Besides, it is not safe to travel after dusk. Better pass your night here," proposed the maiden's father. Behind him stood the maiden, reinforcing her father's proposal with a meaningful smile.

Narada was only too happy to agree. At night it was the maiden who served him his dinner and who prepared his bed. Narada was overwhelmed.

"My boy," in the morning the maiden's father told him, "I've only one child—my daughter. Providence has given me enough. Would you mind marrying my daughter and inheriting my property?"

Narada blushed and made no protest. The proposed marriage was duly performed and slowly Narada took over the entire responsibility of his father-in-law's property and establishments. His parents-in-law died in due course. Narada was blessed with children. They grew up, got married and promoted Narada to the position of a grandfather. His days passed through pleasures, sorrows and hopes as normal in the life of everybody else.

Once in a while, however, he was beset with melancholy. He felt as if he had forgotten something vital. But before he had the time to concentrate and find out what that was, his attention was diverted to some mundane problem.

One day it began to rain incessantly. At midnight Narada woke up with a jolt. The river was in spate and the embankment had broken, flooding the whole village. In no time parts of his house began to collapse.

"Where are you, my husband!" cried out his wife. As Narada plodded through the water and mud in the direction

of the voice, his grandchildren's cries were heard: "We are being swept away by the tide, Grand-pa." He could also hear the shouts of his sons and daughters. The bewildered Narada groped in the darkness, his heart breaking at his inability to come to anybody's rescue. In the flashes of lightning he had flitting glimpses of his dear ones being carried away by the currents.

"O God!" cried out Narada. That woke him up. In fact, he had dozed off for a second while bending to fill the leaf-cup with water. He returned to Lord Vishnu with the water, but blushing almost to death.

"Narada! did you by any chance take a little more time than a moment?" Vishnu asked while receiving the water.

"I understand, my Lord, Maya is that which keeps the souls away from you...."

"While I wait!" added Vishnu.

⊠⊠ Maya is popularly understood as a synonym of illusion. But the term has far greater significance at the spiritual plane. It is the creative power and its role in our life changes as our consciousness grows. "All manifestation proceeds by the two terms, Vidya and Avidya, the consciousness of unity and the consciousness multiplicity. They are the two aspects of the Maya, the formative self-conception of the eternal," says Sri Aurobindo. The story illustrates the spell of Maya operative in nature—a concept between the two aforesaid definitions of Maya. Even though man remains immersed in ignorance, the Lord never gives him up. ⊠⊠

When the White Lotus was Red

Not very far from the locality was the forest. A narrow passage led to a beautiful lake and the hermitage of Sage Sivashray on its bank.

Sivashray was a noble Yogi—a man of few words, always calm, kind and courteous to visitors.

Many came to seek his blessings, but some young men wished to become his disciples and learn Yoga. The sage, however, chose only a few for initiating them into Yoga. Those chosen had to live with him for five years to complete their course.

One afternoon three young men, coming from a distant town, met the guru. They ardently wished to be enrolled as his disciples.

"Please be here. Let the night pass. We will take a decision in the morning." said the sage.

The youths were happy.

It was morning—a delightful one. The sage sat before his hut, looking at the lake. The three youths appeared before him and greeted him. The sage asked them to sit down.

"How charming is that lotus—how dazzlingly red!" commented the sage showing his finger at a lotus in the lake.

"How dazzlingly red indeed!" remarked one of the young men, Rudraprakash.

"I had never seen a lotus so very deep red!" said the second young man, Manisundar by name.

But the third one, Chandrachud, hesitated and observed, "O Sage, it is a wonderful lotus, indeed! But it appears white to me, not red!"

The sage smiled, but said nothing.

The three young men partook of their breakfast with the disciples of the sage. Then the sage summoned Manisundar, "My son, you are not meant for the path of Yoga. Better go home and lead a good life."

Everybody knew the sage was not likely to alter his decision. Manisundar went back while Rudraprakash and Chandrachud stayed on.

Five years passed and the two completed their lessons in Yoga. By then Rudraprakash had obtained the guru's permission to live in the Ashram as a Yogi all his life. In fact, all concerned knew that Rudraprakash was to succeed Sivashray, for the young man had proved himself to be absolutely faithful to his master and truly dedicated to the discipline of Yoga.

While taking leave of the guru—expressing his sincere gratitude for what he had learnt—Chandrachud said politely, "My Master, I have nurtured a curiosity for long five years."

The guru looked at him with affection.

"Had the lotus that bloomed in the first ever morning we passed here anything to do with the process of your selecting us?" asked Chandrachud.

"It had much to do with it!" disclosed the sage. "Manisundar knew that it was a white lotus, but he declared it as red only to please me, because I had described it as red. Hence I found him unfit for this path! But you spoke out the truth, that you saw only a white lotus."

"But, Master, your kind explanation only increases my curiosity. Rudraprakash too had described the lotus red!" Chandrachud reminded the sage.

A benign serenity brightened the sage's face. "My boy," he explained. "The moment I directed the attention of you three towards the lotus saying that it was red, Rudraprakash saw it red, such was the absoluteness of his trust in my perception. Both Rudraprakash and Manisundar said the same thing, but what a difference was there between the two! Rudraprakash spoke the truth of a higher plane, Manisundar spoke a lie."

Chandrachud prostrated himself to the guru and then bowed even to his friend Rudraprakash and left for his home, carrying a revelation as his last lesson.

⊠⊠ Factual truth and truths of consciousness are not the same. The vision of Rudraprakash that got spontaneously adjusted to the Master's word is an inner vision moulded by an unqualified faith in the Guru and a surrender to him. There are truths beyond factual truths.

Sri Ramakrishna refers to a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. "Do you see how charming are those pigeons?" exclaimed Krishna. "Charming indeed are those pigeons," said Arjuna.

"But they are not pigeons," observed Krishna. "They are not!" agreed Arjuna. ⊠⊠

Back from Pilgrimage

"We will be most happy if you accompany us to the holy places we propose to visit," the village chief told the sage on behalf of the would-be pilgrims. "We will take all care of you."

The sage smiled, but kept quiet. By evening he sent word to the chief that it would not be possible for him to accompany the party, but he had all good wishes for them and he hoped that their travels would enlighten them.

However, the day the villagers set out on their pilgrimage, the sage blessed them and handed over a small parcel to the chief with a request that he should carry it to all the holy places they would visit and dip it in all the sacred rivers and give it back to him on his return.

That was the time when there were no automobiles or motor vehicles for the pilgrims to travel. They had to cover long stretches of distance by foot. The party returned to the village after six months. The sage welcomed them.

"Baba, as advised by you, I carried the parcel to every holy place we visited and dipped in every holy river we came across," the chief told the sage while returning the small parcel to him. The sage blessed him.

There was jubilation among the villagers when they found their kinsmen and relatives back safe and sound. A feast was organised in honour of the pilgrims. The sage volunteered to cook a small side-dish for them personally.

The pilgrims began eating. After they had been served all the major items, the sage distributed to them spoonfuls of what he had prepared for them—a kind of powder.

With great expectations they lifted pinches of the powder to their mouths, but their lips were curled. Obviously they did not relish it!

"How does it taste?" asked the sage.

"Well—it's bitter, but must be having some special quality," replied an elderly pilgrim.

"Bitter? I'm surprised, for I expected it to taste sweet!" exclaimed the sage.

"Of what stuff is the powder made Baba?" asked the village chief.

"Bitter gourd. But the same parcel of bitter gourd that travelled with you to all the holy places and had dips in so many holy rivers. I thought its nature would have changed!" said the sage.

At least some of the pilgrims understood!

⊠⊠ The story does not discourage pilgrimage, but disillusions those who believe pilgrimage to be a great achievement. Only thing that matters from a spiritual point of view is the change of one's nature and that hardly results from visiting holy places. ⊠⊠

Under the Wish-fulfilling Tree

The young traveller who had lost his way in the forest found shelter in a hermitage.

"This is a wonderful forest." said the hermit while sharing his austere dish with his guest. "There are wild animals and strange beings, health-giving water-falls and hills hiding jewels and at least one wish-fulfilling tree."

"What did you say? Wish-fulfilling tree?" The traveller interrupted the hermit.

"That's right", said the hermit.

"Do you know where it is?" asked the traveller.

"I know. In fact, it is nearby. But I never venture there!"

"But why?" asked the traveller with uncontrollable curiosity.

"You see, I have developed, through my *sadhana*, a rapport with the wild animals and even the supernatural beings. But I have not yet prepared myself sufficiently to make my acquaintance with the wish-fulfilling tree."

"But, Sir, what is there to prepare about it? From what I have read and heard, I know that one gets whatever one thinks of standing under the tree. Is that not correct?"

"That is correct. But I am here for spiritual gain alone and that is something one can have only through Yoga, not through the wish-fulfilling tree," explained the hermit.

"I see. Will you mind showing me the tree?"

"I'll advise you not to repeat your request. It is not safe for one who does not have a complete control over one's thoughts to go near it," said the hermit. The traveller implored upon him to show him the tree again and again, but he turned down the appeal.

Taking leave of the hermit, the traveller wandered around the hermitage, observing all the trees. He knew that the coveted tree was somewhere nearby.

His eyes soon fell on a tree that looked unusual. Around it was a vibration, the like of which he had never know earlier.

"Is this by any chance the wish-fulfilling tree?" he asked himself standing under it. "I wish I had a bed to relax here for a while as tired I am!" he muttered.

There popped up a cosy bed in the twinkle of an eye. "Good luck! I've found the tree!" he said as he sat down on the bed. He had never known a more comfortable cushion.

"How fitting would it be to have a few delicious items to appease my hunger—and some fruit juice!"

Delicacies and drinks materialised before him as soon as he had finished wishing for them. He ate them to his heart's content and lay down on the bed.

"What would be more appropriate than a beauty to massage my tired legs!"

And there was a damsel massaging his legs. He fell asleep, while feeling a kind of contempt for the hermit who would neither reap the benefits of his knowledge of the tree nor would introduce anyone else to the tree.

It was evening when he woke up from his nap. Darkness was enveloping the forest.

Suddenly what crept into his mind was the thought of a tiger. What if a tiger spies upon him?

And the next moment—before he had any opportunity to realise what the hermit meant by the need for control over one's thoughts to be eligible to know the wish-fulfilling tree—a ferocious tiger pounced upon him and disappeared into the wood along with him.

▩ ▩ Our thoughts are no less powerful than our actions. One's wishes immediately become a formation and it tries to materialise. If it does not, it is because we often nullify it with contradictory wishes, conscious or unconscious. To wield any kind of power without a control over one's consciousness is dangerous. ▩ ▩

Roy Sahib Turns Non-violent

One of the laudable virtues (the list will make a volume) of Roy Sahib Virbahu, the scion of the Jugalpur Zamindars, was his devotion to Goddess Kali.

During the Puja, Roy Sahib showed great reverence for the Goddess by arranging to sacrifice a large number of goats at the temporarily erected altar. His charmed admirers did their best to honour his devotion, that is to say, they did full justice to the meat as *prasad*. Roy Sahib took the lead. To partake of the holy food in the company of the worthy was privilege non-pareil.

Hence it was unusual that one season, while it was time to make arrangements for the Puja, to make the image and construct a platform, Roy Sahib looked rather gloomy and grave.

And he burst forth, at the sight of the bonny goats which his manager showed him and which were to be sacrificed: "Take them away! No animal sacrifice this time!"

Members of his inner circle felt like experiencing an earthquake. His officials were stunned. Nobody could have foreseen a time when Roy Sahib would have such an explosion of compassion in his heart, when he would grow into a saviour of the dumb creatures.

None dared to question his decision. His face reminded them of a chunk of dark cloud. A small scratch and it could burst into thunder and lightning!

A delegation of courtiers met the latest wife of the zamindar. She was known for her conscience as well as her hold on her husband.

"Give a thought to the knotty issue, Mother! The goddess visits us only once a year. She is not accustomed to pure vegetarian dishes. Must we deprive Her of Her favourite items? What impression would she carry of us? What report of her experience would she give to her fellow divinities?" they asked her.

While her husband's conduct amused her, she also appreciated the arguments given by respectable well-wishers of her family.

"I will see what I can do about it", she assured the delegation.

She broached the issue before her husband at an opportune moment.

"Look here," she said, "would it be right to cry a halt to the tradition of offering meat to the divine guest all of a sudden?"

Roy Sahib looked at her. His eyes betrayed two lakefuls of sadness. The lady found it difficult to bear the pathetic look. She turned her eyes away, but said again in a tender voice, "Well, after all it is a hoary tradition...."

"I never imagined that you too could prove heartless," cried out her husband.

The deep anguish in that piercing voice shocked the lady, but she was also happy that her husband's attitude had changed, that he was now a votary of non-violence, for she never relished the tradition of animal sacrifice.

"To speak the truth, I approve your decision in principle, but all I wish to say is, it may not be right to execute it all of a sudden...."

"All of a sudden? What do you mean by it?" Roy Sahib's voice grew even louder. "It is now three years since my teeth began to fall. More than half had gone by the time of the Puja the year before last. However, I managed to eat the meat. Even last year, despite three-fourth having gone, I chewed the stuff with great difficulty. Now I am totally toothless and yet you advise me to continue sacrificing the goats. If this is not heartlessness towards me, what else is?"

Roy Sahib fell silent, his voice choked.

⊠ ⊠ The target of the satire is obvious. What masquerades as religious devotion is often nothing more than one's interest, so much so that no external agency is necessary to remove the mask. It falls off by itself. ⊠ ⊠

The Flattered Donkey

The guru was in the habit of visiting his house-holder disciples, on foot. He was growing old and often he looked tired. But he never complained.

One of his disciples one day brought him a handsome donkey. "Sir, be pleased to use this creature as your vehicle. It pains us to see you walking from village to village through sand and mud. This is a sturdy animal and will serve you well," he told the guru.

Even though the guru did not mind walking, he was not inclined to refuse a gift made with genuine love. He accepted the donkey.

Next day the guru was scheduled to pay a visit to the landlord's house. He rode the donkey and the donkey was led by his disciples who walked flanking it. A number of men and women had gathered in front of the landlord's mansion to receive the guru. They prostrated themselves before the donkey. The guru was garlanded before he had alighted and some of the flowers fell on the donkey. It felt flattered.

While the guru was escorted into the mansion, the donkey was led into a shed under which the landlord's donkeys were kept.

"You are great!" said the landlord's donkeys. "We are proud that one of us commands such great awe and respect!"

The guru's donkey laughed. He too had begun to realise his greatness.

An hour or so later the guru came out of the mansion. Meanwhile the landlord's servants had fed the donkey well. The guru rode it back to his Ashram.

Day after day, wherever the guru went riding the donkey, devotees prostrated themselves before it without waiting for the guru to alight. The donkey invariably interpreted the gesture as ovation due to him.

Because of some holy ceremony in the landlord's household, once the guru had to visit his house consecutively for three days. That, of all the places, was found by the donkey to be most congenial. He was always eager to go there. He was annoyed that he did not receive the same kind of reverence elsewhere.

After the ceremony was over the guru did not move out of his Ashram for a week. Then he accepted an invitation from a disciple and agreed to visit his house. The donkey was happy to be brought out of its shelter. The guru rode it and the disciples led it towards its destination. But as soon as they reached the crossroads from which they were to take a road opposite to the one leading towards the landlord's house, the donkey refused to budge. It then turned towards his old favourite road.

The disciples, naturally applied force to divert its course. The angry donkey threw the guru off his back and ran towards the landlord's house.

That was not far and with great expectations it pushed its way right onto the verandah of the mansion and was about to enter the inner courtyard when the landlord's servants began thrashing it and driving it out.

The donkey limped back to the street, muttering, "Only if they had recognised me!"

⊠⊠ It is said that the first sign of stupidity is it does not suspect itself. The story is an allegory and its significance is deeper than understood on the surface. The donkey stands for the ego. When a person of some spiritual attainment is recognised for his inner merit—or even when a traditional guru succeeding another guru is revered as a symbol, his ego is likely to usurp the glory—and it fails to understand its mistake even when snubbed.

Swami Nigamananda has narrated the story in a shorter form. ⊠⊠

The Wholly Holyman

The young prince was enamoured of a holy man. One day the boy returned home without his diamond-studded ring and his gold necklace. "The holy man was pleased to receive them, Mother," he told the queen.

"How much holy is he?" The queen asked.

"He is wholly holy, Mother!" replied the prince.

"How did you know?"

"Well, he can see birds beyond the clouds, stars behind the stars, and lands beyond the sea. The other day he told me that there were more than a thousand trees in the village on the other side of the hill. I climbed the hill and saw for myself. What he said was true!" replied the boy. "Who but a holy man can be far sighted like that?" challenged the prince.

The queen nodded gravely and said, "Well, such a far-sighted sage deserves to be honoured in a far better way. Why don't you invite him to dine with us?"

"I will do so gladly. But who knows the whims of a holy man! I only wish that he cares to come!" said the prince happily. Next day he invited the holy man to the palace.

"Well, well, even though I do not entertain invitations, I will come!" said the fellow. What the prince failed to observe is, the holy man could hardly suppress his excitement.

The king was away at some distant castle. It was the queen who received the guest who was escorted by the prince himself.

"Welcome, O holy man!" the queen said in the way of greeting him.

"Wait a moment," said the holy man, on the threshold of the entrance, as he closed his eyes. He then shouted, "Go away or I'll kick you out!"

The queen's maidservants and the prince were surprised. With whom was the holy man angry? Who among those present did something awfully unholy? As they exchanged uncertain looks among themselves, the guest sported a benevolent smile. "It's nothing much, O noble queen, it is just that I could see a filthy drunken fellow trying to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the great temple at Dwaraka. The priests, obviously, were negligent. But the intruder, terrified at my shout, is gone!" he explained.

While everybody looked amazed, the queen alone looked amused. "Great!" she exclaimed, "So, you can see things thousands of miles away, can you? Wonderful. I had never met a sage with such uncanny powers. I'm sure, O holy man, you can also look through our eyes and read our minds!"

"I can, if I please, O noble Queen. For example, I can read the surprise and appreciation that dominate your mind just now," said the guest.

"Indeed!" commented the queen.

The prince was very happy that the man he admired had impressed his mother. He ushered the holy man into the reception room of the queen's apartment and sat engrossed listening to the stories narrated by the holy man, of course all about his own great Yogic achievements.

The lunch was announced. The queen requested the guest to come into the dining room. He and the prince were served with a plateful of *polau* and several other delicious items. But, while the prince had been served a big *laddoo* on a gold plate, the guest had been deprived of the item.

The *laddoo* was not only big, but also colourful and fragrant. The holy man looked at it again and again wistfully. He, however, could not complain about his being deprived of it. The queen entered the dining room just when the two were to begin eating.

She looked at the dishes laid out before them and spoke aloud, "Where is the holy man's *laddoo*? I had seen it inside

the kitchen. Where did it go?" The guest was happy that he was at last going to have the missing delicacy.

"Where else could it be, O noble Queen! The server just left it behind in the kitchen!" said the guest.

"You see it in the kitchen, don't you?" asked the queen very affably.

"Yes, of course!" agreed the guest.

"But I see it somewhere else. Will you please search for it inside the *polau* on your plate?" suggested the queen.

Indeed, the *laddoo* was discovered inside the well-arranged pile of *polau*. The holy man looked crestfallen. "What a pity it is that one who could see a drunken man entering a temple thousands of miles away, failed to see the *laddoo* right in front of him. Maybe, you saw the drunkard in the same way you saw the *laddoo* lying in the kitchen. Right? Never mind, Please finish your lunch," said the queen. The holy man and the prince ate in silence.

"Look here, fellow, you're lucky that the king is away. He is not in the habit of pardoning cheats, particularly those who pass themselves off as holy ones," the queen warned. The fellow stood, his head hung.

"And, my dear son, I hope you have had your lesson!" the queen observed looking at the prince.

"Yes, Mother," said the prince and looking at the pretender, said in a stern voice, "Get out and get lost!"

While exposing the illusion which cheats, the story also teaches that common sense and discretion are not opposed to one's faith.

Wisdom Through Charity

The zamindar had a cosy garden-house on the river bank. His valued guest, a sage, had been put up there.

The sage was giving a discourse to three young seekers. "You have, without question, accepted certain identities for yourselves. A moment's introspection would show you that such identities were imposed on you. Your first identity is your name. Did you choose your own name? No, it was awarded to you by your parents or some other loving relative. Your second identity is your parentage. But you never chose your parents! Then follow your nationality, your religious faith, your language, etc. None of them is your conscious choice.

"Once you have woken up to this reality, you should ask yourself calmly—who are you? Do not rest content with the immediate answer that wells up from within but go deeper and deeper and keep on looking for an ever more convincing answer. Probably you'll get it or, may be, you'll have the feeling that a fully satisfying answer is there somewhere within yourself."

The young men listened to the sage in rapt attention. They asked relevant questions arising from the sage's discourse and the sage satisfied them with his answers.

The zamindar's wife, who stood at the door and also heard the sage's speech, came near him after the youths had left the scene. "O Sage, I am going to receive four of my dear friends tomorrow. They are from the elite of the city. I request you to impart to them some such pearls of wisdom."

"What brings them here, my daughter?" queried the sage.

"A desire to break away from the hullabaloo and tension of their urban life. They would love to spend a day here amidst nature," answered the lady. "One of them is Judge Sahib's wife, the other is the magistrate's wife, the two others are daughters-in-law of different business houses: they are always busy. No time for spiritual reflection," she added.

Next day she ushered her four friends into the sage's presence. They bowed to him and sat cross-legged before him.

"O Sage, what obliged God to create this universe?" asked the Judge Sahib's wife.

"Is it true that the soul exists after death, Sir?" asked the magistrate's wife.

"Your questions are profound," remarked the sage. The two ladies looked happy.

"How is the climate in the city?" asked the sage.

The ladies answered his query enthusiastically. From climate the topic moved on to the erratic rains, the mosquito-menace, the paucity of funds for civic amenities, etc. The ladies enlightened the sage on several issue of urban life.

It was time for lunch and they stood up.

"But, well—our questions...." a lady remembered.

"Never mind. Keep them alive in your minds. The answers will come to you tomorrow or the day after," the sage assured them. The next day after her guests left, the zamindar's wife told the sage, "Sir, I suspect, you deliberately avoided answering their questions. Pardon me if I'm wrong"

"You are right, my child."

"But why, if I do not sound impertinent?"

The sage said nothing. The lady went away after a while.

In the evening a villager notorious for his vagrancy and lies, saluted the zamindar's wife. "Mother! Will you kindly lend me your gold ring only for tonight? I promise to return it to you in the morning," he said.

The lady was not only surprised but also irritated. "Begone, I say! Audacity!" The fellow ran away.

At night, after his dinner, the sage asked the lady, "My child, will you mind lending me your gold-necklace for a night?"

The lady immediately took off her necklace and asked, "Do you need any other ornament, Sir? And, why for a night only? Be pleased to keep them for good or do with them whatever you please!"

The sage smiled. "Thanks, my child, I need neither your necklace nor any other ornament. But why did you refuse to give on loan a lesser thing, your ring, to someone else who prayed for it in the evening?"

"You mean, to that loafer? To give the ring to him would have been like throwing it into the drain!" remarked the lady.

"Do you now understand why I refused to answer the questions put by your friends? My words would have been lost on them. In fact, it was I who had dispatched that loafer to you."

The lady looked on, trying to grasp the sage's observation.

"My child, if you are not prepared to part with a mere physical wealth when it is sought by an unworthy person, should one not think twice before passing an invaluable or subtle wealth to somebody? Your friends were nice people, but for obtaining higher knowledge one needs aspiration, true quest and humility. Neither mere curiosity nor asking a question or two simply because someone is by chance available to answer them, is enough. Do you understand? Wisdom received through charity serves no purpose." "Yes, Baba!" the lady responded with humility.

⊠⊠ One must have the *Adhikara,* or right, not only to speak on spiritual matters, but also to seek answers to profound questions. In the second case, the right is earned by a sustained thirst for knowledge. Short of that, no knowledge, even when received, has any effect. ⊠⊠

Wanted a Scholar— Old and Bald

The scholarly priest was a great favourite of the king. Although there were other scholars in the court and several more in the city, the king would consult none but his priest when faced with an astrological or a philosophical problem.

To justify the king's trust in him, the priest had to pretend that there was hardly anything under the blue sky which his knowledge did not cover, there was hardly an issue for which his brain could not churn out a solution.

A time came when he began to believe that he was a pundit non-pareil!

While the king sang his priest's glory, the discerning people of the city sang the glory of another scholar, Shastri—a man of the priest's age. Shastri never sought fame, but Dame Fame seemed determined to embrace him. Young aspirants for knowledge flocked to him and whenever there was a dispute over an issue in the Academy of Pundits attached to the ancient Shiva temple, Shastri's was the last word.

Once the Academy sponsored a series of discourses by Shastri in the evenings spread over a fortnight. Listeners were all praise for his lucid explanation of scriptures.

The royal priest was quite upset over Shastri's popularity. He feared that the king might fall for the new star. But he kept his heart-burning bottled up in himself till the fateful evening when he found his darling wife getting ready to visit

the temple to hear Shastri's discourses. No wonder that he should lose his sleep upon hearing his wife's comment when she was back from the temple: "Never, never in my life had I heard so sweet, so simple yet so profound a discourse! Shastri deserves to be crowned the monarch over scholars!"

"Monarch over scholars! Shastri—and not I—should be the one to be crowned the monarch over scholars! Must I stomach this coming from the woman I have looked upon as my queen?" the priest repeated silently to himself.

True, he did not get a wink of sleep, but he put his temporary insomnia to good use. He hit upon a highly imaginative plan to remove his irritant.

He sought a private audience with the king. "My good Lord," he said in an ominous voice, "the city is threatened with a calamity—an earthquake. That is what my astrological calculation shows."

"Is that so? Can't we do something to ward it off?" asked the anxious king.

"If you know the cause, you will know the remedy. The eastern wall of the fort was erected in a way not sanctioned by the stars. It must be demolished. But before that, work for a new wall must be launched. The auspicious hour for it is coming tomorrow. We should not let it pass."

"Is that all?"

"No, my lord. The foundation for the new wall must be laid on a man buried alive."

"A human sacrifice is needed; is that all?"

"Right, but the man to be sacrified must be a scholarly Brahmin—old and bald."

"Can't that be avoided? Can't you manage with one of the criminals awaiting execution?"

"Sorry, my lord, no."

"Well," said the pensive king. "Since what is at stake is the fate of our fort city inhabited by thousands, we may have to sacrifice a Brahmin, after all!"

He then asked the priest to do whatever was necessary, without giving it any publicity. He called his trusted *Kotwal* and instructed him to carry out the priest's order without the slightest hesitation.

The priest was delighted.

The *Kotwal* was elaborately briefed by the priest. "Tomorrow, at midnight, is the propitious hour. Shastri is the man who fulfills all the conditions necessary for the sacrifice. You must take hold of him in the evening and keep him in your secret custody and lead him to the watchpost over the eastern gate at midnight," said the priest.

The dutiful officer took due note of the instruction.

That night when his wife praised Shastri's latest discourse, the priest giggled.

"Why do you laugh?" asked the lady.

It was difficult for the priest to suppress his glee. "You have heard the last discourse by your darling speaker!" was his cryptic comment, to begin with. Soon he told her the fate that awaited Shastri without, of course, disclosing that he was the author of the mischief.

The lady kept quiet. But the first thing she did in the morning was to send her maid to Shastri—with the most important of messages the poor scholar had ever received in his life.

Shastri escaped to the neighbouring kingdom immediately, but not before alerting all the Brahmins in the city who were old, bald and scholarly. By sundown the city was without a single such soul.

"My Lord," an anxious *Kotwal* reported to the king at night, "the Brahmin chosen by the priest for the sacrifice is missing."

"So what! Take hold of another Brahmin who fits the description!"

The king looked disturbed.

"My Lord, there is only one Brahmin who fits the description, but...."

"There is no 'but' about it. Don't you understand that it is a matter of life or death for all of us? Go and take hold of him straightaway and sacrifice him," said the king.

"But, my Lord, the one I am speaking of is none other than the priest, the royal priest himself! He is the solitary Brahmin, old, bald and scholarly, left in the whole city and its surroundings!"

The king stood pensive for a moment. Heaving a long sigh, he then said, "Well, well, what is inevitable has to be gone through. We must sacrifice him though it will be an irreparable loss to us. The only question is, who will perform the ceremony if the priest himself becomes the object to be sacrificed?"

"My Lord, there is a young scholar who heads the Academy of Pundits in the temple and he is reputed to be a master in the laws governing every ritual and ceremony," said the general.

"Indeed, I have heard of him. Inform him that we appoint him to the post of our priest with immediate effect. Explain the situation to him and go ahead with the ceremony. There is no much time to lose before the auspicious hour strikes," said the king. "But first secure our old good friend who alone can save us from the calamity prophesied by himself, through his own sacrifice."

The officer forthwith marched with a few trusted lieutenants to the eastern gate.

The priest was already there, ready to preside over his rival's liquidation.

"Why did you not bring the captive along?" he demanded of the *Kotwal,* haughtily.

The general gave a sign to his lieutenants. They pounced upon the priest and bound his hands and feet and dumped him in the pit made for the ceremony. To the stupefied

scholar the *Kotwal* then explained the logic of his queer conduct.

It had been a bit too late for the priest to realise that he too was old and bald, apart from being a scholar.

The *Kotwal* then galloped to the young scholar's house and brought him to the spot, explaining him on the way the very strange and bizarre situation that had arisen.

The young scholar was intrigued. He had never read or heard of a rite that needed burying alive a scholar old and bald. He asked the venerable priest in highly sophisticated Sanskrit, beyond the comprehension of those present, about the situation and the priest confessed in equally sophisticated Sanskrit that he was only paying for his own mischief.

The clever young scholar told the *Kotwal* to withdraw from the scene along with his lieutenants, for the unusual rite did not permit any third party's presence. As soon as the *Kotwal* obliged him, the scholar released the priest who fled in the dark. Then the young man filled up the pit and sat on it lighting a fire and chanting hymns for an hour and then informed the *Kotwal* that the ritual had been completed and the impending disaster had been smoothly averted.

⊠⊠ Envy blinds one to reality as nothing else does—and ego blinds one to one's own defects. Ego and envy together can prove unexpectedly ruinous to the person nurturing them. This story drives this point home and at the same time tells us that mere scholarship or high position hardly lifts one above such vices. ⊠⊠

A Strange Ware for Sale

"Well, my friend, I know something about Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga, but have never heard of Billi Yoga. Will you please explain?" the stranger asked the man who was trying to sell him a strange ware, a partly brown Billi, a cat.

"But you look like a Yogi and quite an aged one! How do you say that you know nothing about Billi Yoga, propounded by no less a guru than Swami Suryadev?" demanded the cat-vendor.

The stranger gave a start. "Which Swami Suryadev are you speaking of? I hope you are not referring to the one who lived at Bhadrapur, in a hermitage on the river-bank?" he asked.

"I'm of course referring to him! He left the hermitage all of a sudden some forty years ago. But we the children of his disciples, still follow the original and simple method of meditation he had demonstrated. In fact, the method has found worthy adherents far and wide!" said the man with enthusiasm.

The stranger looked petrified.

"Can you tell me, my friend, if I can meet any of the original disciples of Swami Suryadev?" asked the stranger.

"Why not!" said the man after a moment's brooding during which he was trying to remember the old veterans of the locality who were in touch with the Swami and who were still alive.

"Yes, you can meet the old Prabhakar at his home—the seventh house to the west from that banyan tree there. We envy him, for the cat he owns is a direct descendant of the guru's cat and, indeed, it is fully brown in colour like the original one," said the man. His voice betrayed reverence for Prabhakar as well as his cat. "But should you decide to follow our way of meditation, buy the cat from me. Please."

The man informed the stranger where he lived. The stranger walked down to Prabhakar's house. It was already evening. After a bath Prabhakar was about to sit down for meditation. But since the visitor looked like a hermit, he was courteous towards him and offered him a well-cut and polished wooden plank to sit.

"My friend, I wished to be enlightened about Billi Yoga. I am told that you can help me," said the stranger.

"Aren't you a bit too old to begin practising it? But in matters like this it is never too late. Well, as you must have known, the cat is no ordinary creature. It has some relationship with the supernatural world. Our guru, the great Swami Suryadev had found out that if we meditate with a cat tied to a pole near us, it must be a bamboo pole—and the cat should be preferably brown—the result will be excellent," explained Prabhakar.

Almost bewildered, the stranger asked, "Is this what Swami Suryadev taught you?"

"I must tell you that he taught many wonderful things. His discourses were very valuable. Unfortunately we kept no record of them. But this method of meditation he demonstrated evening after evening. I used to observe it with alert and keen eyes. I follow it as accurately as any faithful disciple can. Now, you observe me doing it," said Prabhakar.

He then looked for his pet cat. It was evidently a pampered and proud creature, wearing a colourful chain around its neck. He brought out a string of rope, reverentially touched it with his forehead and then tied the cat to a bamboo pillar

and spread a piece of blanket near it and sat down on it in lotus pose and closed his eyes.

The stranger too shut his eyes. By and by the mystery of Billi Yoga grew clearer in his memory. Suryadev had a naughty brown cat which would jump onto his lap and tug at his beard whenever he sat for meditation. That is why he kept the cat tied to a bamboo pole of his hut for the duration of his meditation. One day he had the sudden inspiration to leave Bhadrapur for Haridwar. That was forty years ago. His disciples had forgotten his teachings, but had made a cult of this practice.

The stranger stood up quietly and left the place while Prabhakar was still meditating. He sighed, difficult to say whether in despair or in any other mood. He was none other than Swami Suryadev. Though ninety he was strong enough to undertake a travel to his old familiar place. He now had the last lesson of his life and also realised that nostalgia had no place in the life of a Yogi.

This satire on man's readiness to remember the superficial form and forget the spirit of spiritual quest, to raise a useless practice to the status of a sacred ritual, is among the sharpest stories of this genre.

Secret of the Poet's Sight

The king was charmed by the poems of the unknown young poet which he happened to read by chance, courtesy his son. The adventurous prince, while travelling incognito in different parts of the kingdom, had passed a night in a village in the hilly frontiers and had been entertained to those marvellous pieces.

The king decided to make the poet a courtier. "A verse or two could be a good antidote to my headache that occurs each time the queen and I quarrel or when I feel bad on account of my failure to bag an animal while out on a hunting spree," he told himself.

"But, Father, you would not be able to shift him from his village—at least not for a year or so," said the prince when the king told him about his decision while returning to him the sheaf of poems.

"Ha!" guffawed the king. "Who had heard of a poor young villager refusing to accept a lofty position in the court!"

"Try and see!" was the prince's remark on his father's proud challenge.

The king's emissary chose a horse with a wide back, for he was sure of the poet jumping onto it behind him the moment he was conveyed the royal offers.

He reached the hilly village after a day-long ride and located the poet.

"Congratulations, my friend, you'll live in a mansion, put on dazzling silk and an ornamental *pugree* and were something more—sweet though heavy—the aura of the court-poet. Delighted you are, aren't you?" he told the poet.

"Thank you. But I'm sorry".

"What do you mean?" The emissary's joyous voice was reduced to a squeak at this most unexpected response. However, he recovered from his shock and submitted his proposal, first in a sweet, then in a sweeter and finally in the sweetest possible manner, but only to encounter the same audacious response. "Thank you. But I'm sorry."

The emissary felt like receiving three slaps. He returned to his master and reported his failure, almost on the verge of weeping.

The king was not in the habit of slicing off heads, noses, and ears of his subjects even when pricked in his ego. He appreciated variations in human nature. He sanctioned a handsome amount as TA and DA to one of his clever spies and asked him to explore the mystery of the poet's obstinacy.

The officer was back after a fortnight's leisurely sojourn in an inn near the frontier village and a methodical investigation into the matter and reported to the king, "Your Majesty, it's love; a case of acute love!"

"Be explicit."

"Your Majesty, the boy has fallen—fallen flat in love with a village maiden. But the girl's horoscope would not approve of her wedding until a year had elapsed. And the poet can never be at peace without stealing glances at her, if not meeting her, at least once a day. That explains his unwillingness to leave the village, my Lord."

"I see," said the amused king. "We can do without poetry for a year, can't we?"

The intelligence reached the king when the poet and his beloved were wedded. Once again the king's offer reached the poet and this time he gratefully accepted it. He shifted to his mansion in the capital along with his wife and met the king and was duly admitted to the court as a noble.

But by now the king had grown more curious about the poet's bride than his poetry. "How charming must be the beloved of the poet whose poems are so charming!" he thought and invited the couple to the palace.

The couple came and the girl bowed to the king. "Sit down, my daughter!" said the king affectionately showing her a

chair. He gazed at her for long. Then he moved to another position and observed the girl's profile and then to yet another.

The girl felt embarrassed and awkward, but the king was so keen to satisfy himself that he took no note of that.

"Are you looking for something, my Lord?" the poet asked.

"Well—ah—I mean, is this the girl with whom you were madly in love?" he asked the poet, leading himself to a corner of the room, in a whisper.

"That's right, my Lord."

"But—ah—something must be wrong somewhere...."

"You don't find her beautiful enough for me to fall in love with her. Am I right?" The poet was disarmingly frank.

"Well, yes—but something must be missing from her now over the year and that is why...." the king fumbled.

"Nothing is missing in her my Lord. But something is missing in you," calmly observed the poet.

"In me?" The king wiped his eyes.

"Yes my Lord, but you are not to blame for that."

"You intrigue me. What is missing in me? My eyes are, I believe, as good as yours!"

"My Lord, your eyes are excellent, but you do not have the eyes of a lover!" said the poet.

The king reflected on the poet's remark for a moment and nodded.

"You're right," he said, giving him a pat on the back.

The mystery of human relationship, of love in particular is a mere indication of a higher possibility in the relationship between the devotee and the Divine. All is wonderful to the eye that sees, indeed, only to the eye that sees!

The Ultimate Boon

In days gone by, the taxes due to a king had to be transported by bullockcarts or horse-drawn carriages to the royal treasury in the capital.

That is what was being done. A nobleman, on behalf of his chieftain, was carrying the king's dues loaded in a bullock-cart, to the capital. He had but only four escorts with him, for the way was reasonably safe and he had set out early enough to reach his destination before the sunset. The nobleman rode a horse, but galloped slowly keeping pace with the cart.

But an unexpected shower with terrific wind detained them for hours at a roadside inn. It was late in the afternoon when they resumed their journey and, naturally, darkness set in while they were on a road passing through a range of hills.

A gang of bandits, coming from a neighbouring state, were waiting in ambush in a gorge. They pounced on the nobleman's party and tried to loot the money and valuable gifts the cart carried. The four escorts were no match for the gang. They and the nobleman himself fought bravely in defence of the wealth entrusted to them, but they were about to give up when a group of six friends, all young men, happened to arrive on the spot. They had seen a battalion of the king's sepoys camping on a nearby rock. One of the young men rode the nobleman's horse and galloped like a whiff of wind to inform the sepoys about the fight, while the

other five friends joined the escorts and put up a valiant resistance against the bandits.

But the bandits were a crafty and cruel lot and they would have succeeded in getting away with their loot if the sepoys had not arrived there on time. The situation changed in the twinkling of an eye. The bandits were rounded up. They would have been killed had they not surrendered.

At the request of the nobleman, the six youths accompanied him to the palace which was not far. The sepoys led the bandits to jail.

The king was informed of the incident at once. He ordered for cordial hospitality to be accorded to the young men.

Next day, at the royal court, the bandits were tried and their punishment was announced. Next, the king decided to reward the five brave young friends.

"I do not wish to give uniform rewards to all of you. Each one of you may have a specific need. I will like to satisfy each one individually," said the king and he looked at the senior-most among the five and desired him to speak out his need.

"My Lord, we are happy to have been of some use to our king. That itself is our reward. However, let's plead for a road to my village. Our folks grow vegetables and bring them to the market in this town. During the rains they must plod through mire and waist-deep muddy water for their humble business. The sight saddens me."

"Granted," said the king. The officer concerned was instructed accordingly.

The king then looked at the next young man.

"My Lord, my parents and I live in a dilapidated house. We have no means to build a new one," the young man stated.

"You'll have a fine new house," said the king and the order reached the right officer.

The king's attention went over to the third young man.

"My parents are poor and, unfortunately, I am only an artist and as such cannot earn enough to ensure them happiness," he said.

"You'll have enough property to let your family live comfortably," announced the king. The supplicant was given an estate.

It was the fourth young man's turn to step forward.

"My Lord, my ancestors were widely respected. My grandfather was about to receive a hereditary title to nobility when he died. Had my father been active and in contact with the palace, he would have got the title. But he has been ill for years. At the same time he has not been able to forget the fact that we narrowly missed the title to nobility."

The king found out from the senior courtiers that what the young man said was true. He announced that, on behalf of his ailing father, the young man would receive their title to nobility. That would make the young man a courtier.

The fifth young man blushed when asked to state his need. He managed to say, after some hesitation, that he desired to marry a certain girl in the town—who too had set her heart upon him. In fact he and his friends had visited the town the previous day to plead with the bride's father to let the lovers marry. But then the bride's father was unwilling to receive them because they were strangers. "Only if I could say that the king knows me! To what nobler and greater reference could I take recourse?"

The king laughed affectionately and sent for the girl's father who was now more than pleased to entertain the young man's proposal.

The king's gaze went over to the last young man in the group.

"My Lord, before I put forth my prayer, can I have your Majesty's assurance that it will be fulfilled? I promise that I will not ask for anything in terms of wealth or any material interest or anything which the king, if he is kind to me, cannot grant," said the young man most politely.

The king looked amused. "Go on," he said.

"My village is at the foot of a hill. The valley is well-known for its natural beauty and highly beneficent climate. My prayer is, the king should pass a week, once every year, in my house."

The king sat feeling intrigued. The courtiers whispered among themselves doubting the sanity of the young man. How was he going to benefit by this?

But, by no means it was a prayer for something which the king could not grant!

He agreed and the young man bowed to him, beaming with joy.

Now, it was for the king's administration to see that the promise made by the king was practically fulfilled.

To begin with, a good road was built to the young man's village to facilitate the passage of the royal chariot.

Next, the young man's simple house had to be replaced by a mansion worthy of being the king's residence once a year for (long live the king!) years to come !

Then, the mansion must be supported by an estate the income from which would sustain it and its staff.

Next, the king, as a rule, could not be an ordinary commoner's guest. Hence titles denoting nobility of the highest order were bestowed on the young man.

Finally, the king's hostess should be one who was quite familiar with his preferences in matters of food, rest and everything else. Who but a princess could meet the demand efficiently! Now that the young man was a member of the aristocracy, had an excellent house, was handsome and

intelligent, there was no reason why he could not marry one of the daughters of the king!

⊠ ⊠ We seek so many boons from God, but rarely God Himself. Like the sixth young man receiving everything and even more through a single prayer, a devotee could get everything if he got God. What is meant by everything in the story, is the sense of contentment that comes by direct contact with God and not the physical objects of desire. ⊠ ⊠

The Locked Gate

A guru had two disciples who were in the habit of arguing between them. Often the two accompanied the guru when he went out on pilgrimage or went to visit his other disciples. While he walked in silence, the disciples went on exchanging words heatedly. Each one stuck to his point of view, unwilling to see any truth in the other's.

One day the guru set out for the capital. The two disciples accompanied him. As usual, they argued over many issues most of which were useless.

A heavy shower detained them midway at a rest-house. They resumed their journey after the rains subsided. By the time they approached the town, it was past midnight. The capital was protected by a high circular wall and the gates used to be locked by midnight by sentries who camped atop the wall.

The guru and his disciples found three persons standing before the gate and shouting at one another. They were about to come to blows. In the moonlight, the sentries seated atop the wall were enjoying their quarrel.

The guru observed the three men and listened to their angry exchanges. The cause of their dispute soon became clear to him. The three were residents of the town, but had been locked out as they were late in returning from some pleasure-trip. One of them, who was drunk, proposed that they should storm the gate and march into the town over the smashed metal-plated doors. "Heroes that we are, this will be the right thing for us to do," he claimed.

The second man, who was under the influence of opium, said that they should jump over the wall. "That is going to be as exciting as flying!" he asserted.

The third one who was under the influence of *ganja,* insisted on creeping through the key-hole. "That would be great fun!" he insisted.

As each disputed the wisdom of the other two, there was pandemonium.

The guru silenced them. "Why each of you don't do what you would like to do?" he asked. More categorically he asked

the first man to smash the doors and the second man to jump over the wall and the third man to pass through the key-hole.

They licked their lips, blinked at the guru and did not know what to say or do.

Meanwhile the chief sentry had recognised the guru. He climbed down and opened the doors and received him respectfully.

As the guru and his two disciples entered the gates, the other three followed suit.

"Most of the arguments are like this—unrelated to reality. None of the three could have done what he proposed to do. Yet he was eager to prove the superiority of his method over the other methods. What is more important, there was a method different from theirs—a simple and healthy method. That was to give their identity to the sentries and ask them to open the gates. But they would rather cling to their false and unreal methods than think of the simple and true method," observed the guru.

The two disciples kept quiet. They understood what the guru had in mind—their conduct.

▩▩ Much that passes on as pedantic and theological do's and don'ts and controversies are not only hypothetical, but also valueless from a superior point of view. Often complexities are introduced into what appears to be an impasse, by minds dominated by ego and ignorance, which could, when perceived with humility, present a simple solution. ▩▩

A Companion in the Wilderness

The little Gopal's mother was a poor widow. Her husband had left for her a small plot of land. She raised some vegetables on it. She had a spinning wheel. A village trader supplied her with cotton. She spun threads for him and, for her labour, was paid some rice.

She maintained her little son and herself somehow with these meagre means. She had only two loves, her deity—Krishna whom she called Gopal and her son Gopal. She treated her deity in the same way as she treated her son. She coaxed both of them to eat, to sleep when it was night, so on and so forth.

Gopal began going to school. The mother looked forward to the time when he would be able to read out the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to her.

But Gopal faced a problem. Between his home and the school lay a stretch of wilderness, quite dense with trees at places and absolutely lonely. A fear crept into his heart while passing through it.

"My son, you have an elder brother who lives in the forest. He too is named Gopal. Whenever you are afraid, call him aloud. I'm sure, he would respond and give you company," one day the mother told Gopal.

"I never knew that! What does he do in the forest, all alone?" Gopal queried.

"He looks after his cattle and plays his flute!" said the mother.

Next day, while passing through the forest, Gopal remained alert so that any sound of flute did not escape his ears. Indeed, he could hear the sound, at first very faint and then growing more and more distinct. He had never heard anything more melodious.

"O Gopal-bhai! I'm your younger brother, also called Gopal. Where are you? Loneliness of the forest scares me. Why don't you give me company?" shouted Gopal.

He heard a giggle and, before long, a boy, a bit older than he, sprang up before him. The little Gopal took an instant fancy for the older Gopal and the latter escorted him out of the forest.

"I keep rather busy. So call me only when you are really scared," advised the older Gopal.

"I don't think I will ever again feel scared now that I have known you. I will always remember you...."

"That would do!"

"But even if I am not afraid of crossing the forest alone, will you not appear before me from time to time so that we could play together?"

"Not a bad idea. Indeed, I love playing very much," said the older Gopal.

So, from time to time Gopal would shout for his namesake and he would emerge from the dusky interior or the wood and they would play.

Gopal would report to his mother all about his newfound companion and the joys of playing with him. The mother would shed tears of gratitudes hiding her face from her son and murmur out her thanks to her deity.

The teacher was performing the funeral ceremony of his father. It was customary for the students to offer him whatever they could on such occasions.

Gopal knew that there was nothing his poor mother could give him for the teacher. So, he did not broach the matter to her. Nevertheless, he was sad for he would be the solitary boy to meet the teacher empty handed.

"Why do you look sad?" the older Gopal asked him when they met in the forest. The little Gopal told him his problem.

"I've a potful of milk with me. Carry it for your teacher," said the older Gopal, fetching the pot from some hidden spot.

The little Gopal was delighted.

At the school the students offered to their teacher the different gifts they had brought—coconuts, rice, bananas, jaggery, etc. etc. Some of them gave him money.

At last came the shy little Gopal's turn. The teacher, after receiving the pot from him, poured its content into a larger vessel. But as soon as he had done so, the pot in his hand got filled up again. He poured out its content once again, and as soon he looked into the pot, it grew full to the brim.

The miracle was about to throw the teacher into a swoon. With a tremendous application of will-power he managed to retain his poise. However, he carried the pot hurriedly into a room before anybody else had known about the phenomenon and called Gopal in and asked him where he got it. Gopal told him about his occasional adventures with his namesake and the teacher had enough sense to understand who the other Gopal was.

"My child, wouldn't you lead me to your brother in the forest?" the teacher asked Gopal imploringly.

"Why not, Sir!"

Gopal led the teacher into the forest and shouted for his brother to appear before them, but in vain. A long time passed. The teacher was in tears. That embarrassed the little Gopal and he shouted out this threat to his brother: "If you don't appear before us, I will never— never again—play with you!"

And then he heard the older Gopal's voice:

"But I also play with you as much as you play with me. Must you deprive me of my joy for no fault of mine? Tell your teacher that I appreciate his curiosity, but it is not yet time for him to see or hear me. He must wait—and I assure him that he will achieve his end one day—when he is truly ready for it!"

"Sir, did you hear him?" Gopal asked his teacher eagerly.

"No!"

"No? But I heard him so distinctly!" said Gopal and he narrated what he had heard word by word.

Breaking into sobs, the teacher said, "That is enough for me, my boy, that I have been promised a boon. Great is your mother's trust and unique is your transparent faith and innocence."

⊠⊠ This story has been retold a little more elaborately by Swami Vivekananda. The most important aspect of the story is not the miracle—but the fact that nobody is forlorn from the Lord's point of view, for He is with everybody. What is important is to repose an unqualified trust in the Grace. ⊠⊠

That Explains!

The young king was a ruler with a touch of compassion. He liked to wander in his kingdom unannounced and observe the condition of his subjects, often solving on the spot problems submitted to him.

One day he was galloping slowly through a village when he saw a boy catching a pigeon. Before the king could stop him, he caught it and held it tight in his grip.

The pigeon fluttered its wings desperately in order to escape, but in vain.

"Boy, don't you see in what great distress the bird is? Why don't you free it?" the king asked the boy.

The boy did not know that it was the king he was talking to. "Sir, I caught it after waiting for a long time. Why should I give it up?" he said quite politely.

The king appreciated his argument. After all there was no law to ensure the freedom of all the creatures, big and small, in his kingdom! After a moment's reflection, he said, "Very well, boy, but will you sell it to me?"

The boy thought over the proposal, for that was the first business offer he had received in life!

"Well—er—if I get a good price," he said, looking at the king with expectations.

The king handed out a gold coin. The boy goggled his eyes in disbelief. A gold coin for a mere pigeon! He lost no time in handing over the bird to the king.

A few villagers who recognised the king alerted many others. A crowd collected in no time. Some greeted the king with awe from a distance and some more prostrated themselves to him.

The king climbed a grass-covered mound and released the bird lifting his palms upward.

The pigeon flew away, flapping its wings as fast as it could. The people clapped their hands. The king felt thrilled partly because the pigeon's flight to freedom was exciting and partly because the crowd's appreciation of his noble deed, through shouts and applause, was delightfully deafening!

"Have any of you kept a pigeon or parrot or maina or dove in captivity?" asked the king.

At first there was silence. Then said a farmer, "My Lord, my wife has a parrot with her to echo whatever she says—as if her own voice was not enough for me!"

"Bring it along—without your wife, of course!" said the king. The crowd laughed. The king gave the farmer a gold coin and set the parrot free.

The king galloped away, acknowledging the farewell greetings of the people.

Back in the palace, the king summoned his *Kotwal* and ordered him to announce that whoever had a captive bird could surrender it to the king for a price.

Within a week fifteen birds were received. The king chose a day when he ceremoniously climbed over a roof and set the birds free, one after another. A gathering of courtiers, nobles and commoners applauded him.

More or less an equal number of birds was surrendered to a special officer appointed for the purpose by the end of the next week. As the king climbed the roof for setting them free, the court-poet recited a poem he had composed for the occasion. The gathering applauded the flight of the birds.

It became a weekly ceremony.

A year passed. The king's guru, a sage, paid a visit to the palace. He witnessed the ceremony. The king was hopeful

of hearing a word of congratulation from him, but he merely said—and that too as if to himself—"That explains!"

"That explains what, Sir?" the king queried hesitatingly. The guru did not explain, but he asked the king to put on a disguise and accompany him for a walk the next day.

They entered a forest. The king saw several villagers busy setting nets and traps to catch the birds. Some took recourse to more crude methods. In the process many birds got killed and even more were injured.

"My son, must the birds pay this price for you to receive applause as a compassionate king?" asked the sage and said further, "I observed this on my way to your palace and was intrigued and got an explanation of the phenomenon yesterday!"

"Sir! But I meant well! I really meant to free the captive birds!" muttered the king.

The sage patted the king on the back. "Are you sure you had no other motive? Did you not hanker after praise? My boy, so many subtle laws are at work behind things. Only acts of kindness emanating from pure consciousness can be truly effective," he explained.

⊠⊠ Most of the works of charity are acts of ego, though veiled. With the abundance of charitable acts, the world should be a much better place than it is, if the acts were truly inspired by a higher Consciousness. The story does not discourage acts of kindness, but asks those concerned to mercilessly analyse themselves. ⊠⊠

The Friendly Mirror

In a certain *gurukul* lived many students. Among them was Jaipal. He was quite normal in all human qualities, but his face looked distorted and grotesque to the ordinary eyes. His friends laughed at him behind him and caricatured him. Jaipal was sad.

"Listen to me, boys, every feature has its beauty and its own harmony. Your sights are imperfect. Secondly, you have a very limited notion of what is beautiful and what is not. That is why you cannot see any beauty in Jaipal's face. When you look at him or talk to him, know that he too, like you, is a creature created by God. Unknown to you, there is reason why God made him like that. Once this truth dominates your vision, you will find in him an excellent friend and you will love him. Once you love him, he will look absolutely normal to you, if not handsome," the guru would tell the students.

Some would be influenced by the guru's advice and some would find it beyond them. Jaipal continued to be sad.

One day Jaipal was going through the bazaar when he saw a mirror lying on a side of a road in front of a stationery shop. He picked it up and asked the shopkeeper if it had been left outside by mistake.

"No, boy, I just threw it out because its glass is defective. It reflects one's face in a distorted manner," said the shopkeeper.

Jaipal looked into the glass. His face looked charming. The peculiarity of the glass gave his face a new look.

He gazed at it for long and carried it to his room in the *gurukul.*

Did the mirror show something untrue? By and by he realised that the mirror could not reflect what was not there before it. The harmony and charm he saw were there in him—and the mirror had only rearranged them.

He grew more and more introvert—more concentrated on his inner qualities—and stopped, in a natural way, caring about what others saw in his appearance. Surprisingly, by and by, the others seemed to have stopped noticing anything abnormal in his appearance.

⊠⊠ One's own higher self or inner self is one's best friend—says a great mystic.

A secondary truth that the story contains is, when one ceases to think of one's own defects, the defects cease to be real for others as well. ⊠⊠

The Word

A celebrated sage once camped in a village. The young Rajni, who served him with great devotion, one day asked him, "Sir, my father, my mother, our village teachers and our priest and everybody else too utter "Rama Rama". You, a great sage, are also doing the same. Is there no other or greater or more sure way to invoke the Lord?"

The sage said nothing. Next day he gave a small stone to Rajni. "My boy, show this to the vegetable vendor in the market yonder. Ask him if he would buy it—and the price he would be willing to pay. But do not sell it."

Rajni returned after an hour. "Sir, he is willing to pay a rupee for it. He says it fancies him, but it has no utility," Rajni reported.

"Good," said the sage. In the evening he gave the stone once again to Rajni and asked him to have it evaluated by the owner of a stationery shop in the bazaar. Rajni returned after completing his mission and reported that the shop-owner was willing to pay two rupees for the stone. He could use it as a paper-weight.

After Rajni had showed it to a few more people, he was asked to carry it to the jeweller and find out if he would like to buy it and if so, what is the price he would be willing to pay.

Rajni returned after two hours, wild with excitement. "Sir!" he could hardly speak at a stretch. "The jeweller wishes to know if you would care to part with it for a lakh of rupees.

At first I thought that he was joking. But when I saw him putting on his shirt, ready to follow me to meet its owner, I snatched it from him and came running to you. Is he a fool?"

"No. He is quite intelligent and sensible."

"Then, were the two earlier prospective buyers fools?

"No. They were ignorant."

"How can one pay a lakh of rupees for a small stone like this?" asked Rajni.

"My boy, this is no ordinary stone, but a diamond. The jeweller alone knew its value. The other two did not know. Same is the case with the word Rama. It all depends on how much one realises its significance. For some it is a mere sound; for some others it is a sacred name; for some more it is a hymn for liberation."

A version of the story is told by Sri Ramakrishna. The present narration is based on one told by Shri Babaji Ramakrishna Das of Pondicherry.

When Cleverness Turned into Wisdom

It was raining. Seth Jaimal had come to the market by a horse-carriage and it could have carried him back to his home, but for the return journey the driver demanded a quarter rupee more than the fare fixed for the travel from the town to the market.

Jaimal was not willing to give that much more. He was hopeful of finding a porter to carry his luggage for half that amount. He had lately been out on a pilgrimage and had spent a little more than he had budgeted. He was determined to save as much as he could.

"Look here, fellow, will you carry my luggage up to Haripur?" he asked a poor man who was returning from the market after making some small purchases.

"Up to Haripur? I must be paid a quarter-rupee," said the man.

"No, only half of that."

"Then carry it yourself." The man rebuffed him as he turned his back on him.

Jaimal kept asking several people, but none was willing to carry it for less than a quarter-rupee.

The rain had stopped. Seth Jaimal decided to carry his burden himself. He lifted it all right, but could hardly walk a few steps with the weight. He sat down panting.

All the while a young Sadhu who sat under a tree was observing him. The Sadhu knew the millionaire Seth Jaimal, but the Seth did not know him.

"Sethji," the Sadhu called out, "Will you let me carry your luggage?"

The Seth looked at him suspiciously. "But, mind you, I will not give you more than two annas!"

"That won't do," said the Sadhu.

"All right, I'll give you three annas, not a paisa more!"

"That won't do either. In fact, I will not help you unless you agree to my terms," said the Sadhu.

"What are your terms?"

"You must narrate to me the glories of God or you will hear me narrate them to you on our way. I don't need any money," said the Sadhu.

Seth Jaimal found the condition rather amusing. "All right, you carry my luggage and also tell me whatever you wish to," said the Seth.

They began to walk. The Sadhu went on telling him about the very purpose of life and about the joys of seeking God. At first Seth Jaimal only pretended to hear him while remaining absorbed in his own thoughts. But he did not know when the Sadhu claimed all his attention. By the time they reached the Seth's home after an hour, Jaimal felt that the time he spent in the Sadhu's company had been most rewarding to him.

"Sir, I have been a sinner in making you bear my sack. I thought I was clever, but now I know what a fool I am!" said Seth Jaimal.

"You are clever, though you are not wise," calmly commented the Sadhu.

"What is your advice to me?"

"Offer your cleverness to God. He may turn it into wisdom," said the Sadhu.

The hermit then departed. Seth Jaimal could not decide how to offer his cleverness to God, but at least he began to pray to God and tell him that he was offering his cleverness to Him.

Shortly thereafter the Sadhu died and then died the Seth. The Seth's spirit was led to the court of Yama.

"You have an hour's good deed to your credit against years of bad deeds. Now, for your sins, you must suffer hell for a long time, but for your hour's good deed, which was being in the company of a Sadhu, you can dwell in heaven for a day. Which experience do you want first?" asked Yama.

"Where does the Sadhu's spirit dwell?" asked Seth Jaimal.

"In heaven, of course!" said Yama.

"Can I be near him during the day I deserve to pass in heaven?"

"Why not!" said Yama and he sent him to the Sadhu.

The Sadhu's spirit remained engrossed in God. Jaimal's spirit dwelt near him, filled with reverence for him.

A day passed, but the officials of Yama could not take him away. He was protected by the Sadhu's aura.

"All right," said Yama, "let him skip hell. Let him be there till he is reborn on earth."

"How happy I am!" exclaimed the Seth's spirit.

"Because you had offered your cleverness to God, it became wisdom and it was in your wisdom that you chose to come to me. You will surely be a much better man in your next life," said the Sadhu's spirit.

The Day the Earth Turned Gold

Once upon a time there was a king who was famous for his charity. People said, "To the hungry he gives food; to scholars he gives rewards; to noblemen he gives titles and honours. In fact, he is never tired of giving."

But he had in fact, already tired of giving. He thought, "All my life I have been giving alms and awards. Where is the end? Are the people really needy or they continue to flock simply because I give? Don't I see the same faces coming to me again and again wearing a standard mask of gratitude?"

He thought a lot and decided to stop the practice. "If give I must, it should be only to those who are really needy. It is high time I know who are really needy and, to begin with, I must find out the poorest man in my kingdom," he decided.

Accordingly he sent his minister to find out the poorest man.

A week later the minister returned and announced in the tone of a successful explorer, "My Lord, not far from here, inside the forest, there is a small mountain. On top of that sits the poorest man of our land—a mendicant. He had no roof on his head, nothing on his body except a yard of bark; he lives on whatever fruits some wood-cutters leave beside him on their way home from the forest."

"Is there really such a man in my kingdom? I must see him," said the king and rode into the forest and then climbed

the mountain and found out the mendicant sitting still, his eyes closed.

The king had to wait for a long time. When the mendicant opened his eyes, he said, "I am the king of this land. I am sad to see the miserable condition in which you are living. I want you to dress well! Tell me, which dress will you like? Dhoti or gown?" The mendicant smiled, but kept quiet.

The king said again, "I will like to build a house for you; tell me, what kind of house will you like to own?" The mendicant smiled again; yet he did not speak.

A little later the king again said, "I will arrange to send some food for you everyday. Tell me your preference in matters of food." The mendicant smiled but still kept mum.

The king began losing patience and cried out, "I appeal to you, do speak!"

Slowly but sweetly the mendicant said, "My dear king, you are mistaken. I am not the poorest man. There is another man in the kingdom who is poorer than myself. So far as I am concerned, although I look poor, I am very rich, for I can change the earth into gold."

The king gaped with amazement for some time and asked, "Will you kindly tell me who is poorer than you? And will you kindly reveal to me the secret of transforming the earth into gold?"

The mendicant said, "To know these things you have to follow a certain discipline."

"I will follow," said the king enthusiastically.

"For full one year, everyday, you must come here once before the sunrise and once again before the sunset and spend some time with me," said the mendicant.

"I will do so," said the joyous king, bowing to the mendicant.

And he came there twice everyday without fail. The mendicant seldom uttered any word, but his charming smile always spoke of his affection for the king. He made the king sit down and meditate for some time. For the king, the discipline was a bit awkward experience for the first few weeks. But soon he realised that it was the most welcome change from the dry or anxious hours in the court where he was always surrounded by diplomats and flatterers and discontented people. After a few months he grew so fond of his visits to the mendicant that he eagerly looked forward to the twilights.

The silence of the mountain, the sunrise and sunset which coloured the landscape, the breeze which embraced him with

the message of freedom, the songs of the birds in the wood and above all the quiet yet overwhelming presence of the mendicant slowly made the king a different man. The little time he spent there everyday had its sure effect on the rest of his time and routine.

The king did not remember when a year passed. He even did not know when several years passed. At the end of the third year, one day the mendicant suddenly asked the king, "Well, it seems we have forgotten about the two things you wanted to know—about the man poorer than myself and about the secret of transforming the earth into gold! Would you not like to know about them?"

The king smiled and replied, "But haven't I known them already? I was the poorer man because I was anxious to possess more gold and I was begging to know the secret of changing the earth into gold. And secondly, I believe, by now I have known the secret of changing the earth into gold. When I sit here and marvel at the splendour of nature all around at the sunsets and the sunrise when the colours of heaven are sprinkled on earth—at the diamond-fringed clouds—at all God's creation—all appear to me a thousand times more wonderful than gold."

The mendicant smiled and said, "You have got it—and that is because you have turned gold within.

The Three Candidates

The three boys who were lodged in the inn close to the town came from three different *gurukuls* situated in different regions of the kingdom. All that they knew was, their teachers thought that they ought to see the town which was the capital of the kingdom and that is why they were there.

It so happened that they met a merchant who too had checked into the inn. He claimed that he was thoroughly acquainted with the streets of the town.

"Merchant, Sir, would it be possible for you to take our boys with you to show them the town and the palace?" the three teachers, who had by then become known to one another, requested the merchant.

"Very well, but I cannot take all the three boys on my horse. I will take only one at a time," said the merchant, to which the teachers agreed.

Next day the merchant rode through the town with one of the boys. He showed the boy magnificent royal parks and gardens and the majestic avenue leading to the palace and at last the palace too. Then he and the boy dismounted near a fountain and drank from it. They sat down on a rock under a huge tree overlooking the palace.

"What if you are offered the crown?" the merchant asked the boy all of a sudden.

"Me? The crown?" asked the boy in return. Then he laughed and said, "Surely, you don't expect me to accept it! It pays to be humble, says my teacher. I will be humble and rather live as a commoner."

"Not a bad idea," said the merchant. He led the boy back to the inn.

It was now the turn of the second boy to be out with the rider. After a round of the town, the rider put the same question to the boy when they sat down for relaxation.

"If the crown comes to me, I'll let it come!" said the boy.

"Won't you feel yourself too small for it?" asked the rider.

"Why should I? If the crown comes to me, I'll understand that I deserved it, that's all," replied the boy.

"Not a bad idea," said the rider and he took the boy back to the inn.

Now it was the turn of the third boy to have a ride with the merchant. After the usual round of sightseeing, they sat down on the rock when the rider asked him the same question.

The boy smiled and said, "If the crown comes to me, I will accept it."

"Won't you feel yourself too small for it?" asked the rider.

The boy sat silent for a moment and then said, 'Gentleman, a moment before you asked this question to me, I smelt a mild fragrance. At first I thought that it came from this huge tree under which we are sitting. I looked up but did not find a single flower on the tree. Then my eyes fell on this tiny creeper yonder. It bore a few flowers. I felt amused for a moment. While God would not bedeck this huge tree with a single flower, he let some flowers blossom on this creeper. Hence, His ways have nothing to do with our being big or small, with our deserving something or not deserving it."

The rider smiled. Then he stood up and held the boy by the hand and led him towards the palace. The king had died without leaving an heir. The queen adopted the boy.

Astrologers had found the three boys to be fit for the crown. The man introduced to the boys as a merchant was none other than the *Rajguru,* the priest of the dynasty. It had been for him to make the final selection.

Erudition in Midstream

"How long will it take to reach the other bank?" the solitary passenger asked the lone boatman as they started crossing the river.

"It takes half an hour or a little more or a little less depending on the course of wind and the current. I'll do my best to ply it as fast as I can in view of the gathering storm," said the boatman who at first had been reluctant to set out.

"Be quick!" commanded the passenger, a great pundit, who had insisted on being taken to the other side as he had been invited by the zamindar.

But the pundit was not in the habit of travelling in silence. He loved to talk. He was always accompanied by a few disciples or admirers to whom he lectured on great issues of philosophy.

"Have you studied the Upanishads, boatman?" the pundit, bored of silence, asked.

"Studied, Sir? I'm as illiterate as my boat!"

"I see! What is your notion of Mayavada?"

"No notion, Sir, I'd never heard that word!"

"I thought as much!" sighed the pundit. "I pity people like you. At least one-fourth of your life is a waste without this much basic knowledge of philosophy."

"I agree with you, Sir, we uneducated folks are unfortunate," said the boatman. They were in the middle of the river.

"Do you have some idea about Advaita, Dvaita and Visistadvaita?"

"Oh, no," said the boatman. "Such words are a riddle to me."

"I see. That means, another one-fourth of your life is a waste."

"Quite so, Sir,"

"Do you have any idea of cosmology?"

"No, Sir."

"I see. Do you know of astrology?"

"No, Sir."

"That means three-fourth of your life is a waste.

Suddenly a whirlwind broke out and rains came down in torrents. Despite all efforts of the boatman to keep his boat steady, strong winds shook it violently.

"Sir, do you know swimology?" asked the boatman.

"Oh no!"

"In that case, Sir, your whole life is a waste!" said the boatman. There was not the slightest irony in his voice, but great anxiety. Next moment the boat overturned. The boatman beat his strong arms and reached the shore while the pundit, with all his knowledge of philosophy, went down into the terrible waters.

▩▩ Knowledge is good, but that cannot carry one across the river of life—to safety. What is necessary is the simple faith in Providence. That alone keeps one afloat when the material support slips away. Among others, Sri Ramakrishna too has told this story. The apparent meaning of the episode—that practical knowledge, like that of swimming, is no less important than theoretical knowledge, too is important. ▩▩

The Invisible Blow

Guru Tejabrahma, like most of the gurus, had disciples among the householders, along with the Brahmacharis who lived with him.

Once in a while the guru camped in such villages where a large number of his householder disciples lived. Such a village was Mahigram. He was camping there with a dozen or so of his Brahmachari disciples. Almost all the villagers were devoted to him.

Among them was Raviprasad, a grocer. He was a young man, quite healthy, strong and stout. He was reputed to be proud and rude, but he rarely met with any opposition. Needless to say, that was because everybody feared him.

That is why, it was a big surprise to everybody when, one morning Raviprasad was found to have died in sleep. There was no apparent cause for his death. He had never complained of any feeling of uneasiness nor had he any mark on his body to suggest any external injury or attack from any quarters.

The guru himself grew quite curious because this happened during his sojourn in the village. He began an enquiry. He talked to all those who had met him or had purchased anything from his shop the previous day. They all certified that he was hale and hearty.

"One had to see him when he took Shankar to task while closing his shop in the evening. His words were like cracks of thunder. Who could have thought that such a lusty voice

would fall silent forever in a few hours?" remarked one of the villagers.

The guru straightened up. "What did you say? He took Shankar to task, did he? Which Shankar do you mean?" he asked.

"Shankar, the Brahmachari, a member of your party."

"Why did Raviprasad take Shankar to task?" queried the guru.

"Some item disappeared from his shop when nobody except Shankar was nearby. Raviprasad suspected Shankar to have stolen it. But I must say that Shankar showed exemplary nobility. He never got angry, never uttered a word. He denied the allegation in a soft manner and did nothing more. That was great because being stronger than Raviprasad, Shankar could have taught him a lesson had he so wished!" reported the witness.

"Hm!" The guru closed his eyes for a moment. Then he summoned Shankar.

"How did you react when Raviprasad abused you?" he asked.

"Believe me, Guru, I did not utter a word of protest!" said Shankar.

"I believe you. But tell me how did you react in your consciousness."

"I felt a deep anguish. In fact, I felt like giving him a slap. But I controlled myself."

"You controlled yourself so far as your action was concerned, but not your anger. Right?"

Shankar did not contradict the guru.

"Then?" the guru asked.

"I retired into my room and wept and...." Shankar fell silent.

"And directed your wrath silently towards Raviprasad!" said the guru.

There was silence. The guru then said again, "How much I wish that you had slapped him! That would have released your wrath at the gross physical plane. You should have refrained from slapping him only if you had no wrath in your consciousness. You merely refrained from the physical expression of wrath, not from wrath itself. And when you directed your anguish in silence towards him, it became a formidable occult force—and gave him a blow and finished him off! What a pity!"

⊠⊠ A mechanical restraint of physical violence does not mean much from the spiritual angle. People can do most grotesque violence under the guise of non-violence.

But the case of Shankar and Raviprasad is not limited to this truth alone. It unfolds an occult law—how genuine anguish can change into a terrible force of nemesis. ⊠⊠

Garuda's Compassion

In the wondrous region of the Kailas—the subtle Kailas that could not be visible to the ordinary human eye—was the abode of Shiva.

One evening Vishnu went to see Shiva. He left his vehicle, Garuda, in front of the grand natural arch leading into Shiva's abode.

Garuda sat alone marvelling at the grandeur of the place—the physical place visible to all. The splendours of the rays of the setting sun had sprayed seven colours on the mist and the snow enveloping the high peaks.

Suddenly his eyes fell on a beautiful creature, a little bird seated on the stone arch. "How marvellous is this creation! One who has made the gigantic Himalayas has also made this tiny bird—and both seem equally wonderful!" he thought.

Just then Yama, the guardian deity of Destiny and Death, happened to enter the arch, perhaps with the intention of having a *darshan* of Shiva. As he would step into the other side of the arch, his eyes went over to the bird. His brows were raised. Then he took his eyes off the bird and disappeared behind the arch.

Garuda who observed this, told himself, "Yama looking intently at the bird can mean only one thing: the bird's time is over! Perhaps on his way back Yama will take its soul away!"

Garuda's heart was filled with pity for the bird. He wanted to save it from its impending death. But he told himself, "The laws of Destiny are at work. It is none of my business to interfere in it!"

A minute passed. Garuda found that his emotions were not pacified. "If I can serve the bird, why should I not do so?" he took himself to task about it.

Next moment his other voice told him, "This is my egoistic impulse. Who am I to think of saving anyone?"

Suddenly he heard a subtler voice speaking from deep within: "At the moment I'm not sure whether wisdom lies in my taking action or not taking action. I pray, let whatever I do in this uncertain state, become a part of the total, Providential scheme. I offer my emotions and actions to Thee, my Lord!"

Next moment he took up the bird and at the speed of lightning went down into Dandakaranya and left it on a rock

beside a brook. Then he returned to Kailas and waited for Vishnu.

But Yama came out earlier and he saw Garuda and smiled at him. Garuda greeted the god and said, "May I put a question to you? While going in, you saw a bird and for a moment looked rather pensive. Why?"

"Oh, I had forgotten all about it. Well, the moment my eyes fell on it, I knew that it was to die after a few minutes, swallowed by a python, far, far away in Dandakaranya, near a brook. I wondered how this tiny bird would cover such a great distance in such a short time. Then I forgot about it. Surely, it must have happened, somehow. It was time for the little creature to take a new birth."

Yama smiled and went away. Did he know about Garuda's role in the matter? We do not know.

But Garuda sat stunned. At first uncertain whether to be sad or happy, soon he trancended the need to be in any such state of mind. "O Lord, I'm a vehicle of yours! Let me remain a vehicle of yours both in action and inaction," he said.

He was back in his mood of enlightened equanimity.

▩▩ There are parables which are of immense significance, but which carry the danger of being misunderstood if emphasis is put at the wrong place. This story is not meant to illustrate fatalism; far from that its significance lies in highlighting the attitude of a true devotee—how his prayers and aspirations should be to make his own wishes and actions a part of the supreme scheme. ▩▩

The Last Lock of Hair

"My Lord, the hermit is left with only two locks of hair on his head. As you know...."

"I know," said the young king.

The king grew thoughtful. The hermit was a disciple of his father's guru. The hermit was an ascetic of great knowledge, kindness and power, but he had only one weakness. He could not tolerate a lie. He would get terribly upset the moment somebody uttered a lie or acted in a deceitful manner. In his disgust he would pluck a lock of his hair. And it was known in his close circle that the moment he would uproot his last lock, he would die!

The pensive young king looked at the two inmates of the hermitage who met him. He then smiled and said, "I have an idea. I will bring him here and keep a watchful eye on him."

"That would be excellent. Nobody would ever dare to speak a lie or act falsely before you. The palace will be the safest place for him," agreed the two well-wishers of the hermit.

The hermit had great affection for the young king. He accepted the royal invitation and came over to the palace. Forest or palace made no difference to him.

Beaming with happiness the hermit would observe the proceedings in the royal court, everyday. Everything went fine till an emissary of a vassal state came to present his master's appeal to the king. The emissary bowed and said, "Your

Majesty, my master looks upon you as mightier and nobler than Indra, the king of heavens...."

The hermit stood up, shaking with anger. Before anybody had a chance to stop him, he had plucked a lock from his head. Clenching his teeth, he rumbled in a suppressed tone, "Greater and nobler than Indra! What a blatant, shameless falsehood!"

He staged a walk out. The king ran after him and took hold of him. "These are formalities of court life, dear Sir, please don't take them seriously." The hermit's wrath had cooled down. He smiled like an angel.

But the king did not think it safe to keep him in the palace. He built a hut for him in his exclusive private garden, at the back of the palace. Nobody other than the king or his queen or their maids had access to the garden.

There were devoted servants to take care of the hermit's needs. The hermit lived quietly. His existence was hardly felt.

It was a spring noon. The royal couple enjoyed a stroll and the cool breeze sweeping the lake in their private garden. The queen was exceedingly beautiful. In fact, the young king had married her—a commoner's daughter—because of her nymph-like beauty.

The king and the queen were in an elated mood ! They exchanged jokes and puns and teased each other. At one point the king plucked a flower and hurled it at the queen. The queen feigned hurt. She fell down on the grass as though she had swooned away!

"O dear queen, what a brute I am to hurt you!" exclaimed the king.

Suddenly there was an angry growl. Both the king and the queen were taken aback. While the queen sat up and looked with wide eyes at the hermit's hut, the king ran to him.

But it had been too late. The hermit had plucked his last lock of hair!

"What a hypocrisy! I knew this lady when she was a small girl. Her mother was a poor widow. They had a single mango tree in their courtyard. The widow would climb the tree and pluck the fruit and throw them at her daughter. The girl would lean and show her back so that the mangoes landed on a base softer than the hard ground because scratched mangoes would fetch lesser price! Now the same girl pretends to faint when struck by a flower! O Mother Earth! how do you tolerate such falsehood?"

The king took the hermit's head on his lap as the hermit breathed his last!

"What a pity that I could not explain to the hermit that viewed in its perspective the queen's conduct was not to be interpreted as falsehood ! But I respect his sentiments. It was extreme and rigid, but that too is a comment on the ways of the world. How embarrassing it is that I did not take note of his presence in the garden!" the king said ruefully to his confidants after the funeral rites of the hermit were over.

This unique story, belonging to an oral tradition of Orissa, is an excellent comment on how any man, even a holy man, can become a victim of confusion between different planes of truth. The conduct of the young couple belongs to the plane of romance—and it is quite unimaginative to apply the standard of truth followed at a spiritual plane to their conduct towards each other. Even so, judged literally by the ascetic's yardstick, the queen took recourse to falsehood. This is the irony the story highlights.

The Miracle Yet to Happen

Jagmohan and Kumardev were friends and were very much interested in matters supernatural. But soon they parted ways—Jagmohan fascinated by Tantrik practices and Kumardev following a Yogi.

They did not meet for many years. One night Kumardev heard repeated knocks on his door. He came out in the verandah and whom should he see but Jagmohan!

"Welcome Jagu, I hear much about the miracles you perform. They are quite wonderful. But what brings you here at this hour of the night?" asked Kumardev, while showing Jagmohan into his room.

"My friend, what you have heard about my performance is right. I do wonderful things, but I do them with the help of a spirit whom I enslaved through a certain kind of Tantrik practice. But now, instead of my commanding him, he is commanding me. That is to say, I am expected to command him to help me in performing miracles—that is the only field where he can be of any use; he cannot get engaged in any constructive work. But can I go on showing miracles all the time? When he has no work to do, he keeps on pestering me. If I am asleep, he would wake me up and ask me for work. I get annoyed with him, call him names, but he is no human being to mind it and the kind of spirit he is, he is quite insensitive to my feelings. What do I do?"

Kumardev meditated over his friend's problem for a while.

"Do you have a dog?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed, a very good one," replied Jagmohan.

"Is its tail intact?"

"Yes, it is."

"Good" Kumardev then told Jagmohan what he should do.

Back home, Jagmohan summoned the spirit.

"Here I am, boss, what's the miracle you would like me to perform on your behalf now?" asked the spirit eagerly. He had been quite bored for lack of work.

"Look here, you great imp, you're quite friendly with my dog, aren't you?"

"I'm, boss."

"Fine, the greatest miracle will be to straighten his curly tail. You must do it without causing him any inconvenience. Go and begin at once!" commanded Jagmohan.

"But that I can do in a trice!" boasted the spirit.

"I wish you success!" was Jagmohan's response. "Now, go and do it!"

And the spirit is still trying to do that. He unfurls the dog's tail, and holds it straight, hoping that it will remain straight after he withdraws his hold. But that never happened. The tail curls up at once.

The poor spirit has never been able to perform this miracle of miracles!

⊠⊠ The dog's tail represents human nature. It stubbornly refuses to change. In Sri Ramakrishna's parable, the human nature is represented by a string of curly hair. ⊠⊠

The Magic Stone

There was a hermit who knew the hymn by which one could get the *Chintamani-sheela* or the Wish-fulfilling stone. Whatever one wished for, holding that magic stone in his grip, one could obtain.

But the magic stone was not transferable. One had to earn it oneself by going through a rigid discipline and reciting a difficult hymn for an indefinite period of time.

A merchant went to the hermit and served him well. "Sir, teach me the hymn by which I can get a magic stone," he pleaded with the hermit.

"Why do you want it? Don't you have enough wealth to live happily?" asked the hermit.

"The wealth I have is got through hard labour. Today it is there, tomorrow it may vanish. Besides, I pass through anxious moments devising ways to safeguard my wealth. Once I have the magic stone, I need no other wealth. The magic stone will give me whatever I need!" the merchant spoke frankly and he kept on pleading for the hermit's favour.

The hermit taught the necessary hymn to the merchant.

"How long should I go on reciting it?" asked the merchant.

"As long as you have not stumbled upon the stone!" replied the hermit.

The merchant lived a disciplined life and went on reciting the hymn. A year passed. He was coming out of the river Ganga after a dip when he found a white stone lying on the edge of the water.

He picked it up and looked at it. It was not very bright. "What a fool I am to think that this dull thing could be the magic stone! The magic stone is not likely to fall into my hands so easily," he mumbled to himself.

He then flung the stone into the river and went his way.

Five years passed. One day he saw a glittering stone lying before him. "At last I have the magic stone!" he cried out in joy. He squandered away all his wealth, for he was sure that whatever he needed will be given to him by the magic stone.

When nothing of his old property was left, he went into the forest and asked the stone to build for him a new house there. But there was no result. He was hungry and he asked the stone to give him at least some food.

There was no result, for it was an ordinary stone except for its glitter! The magic stone comes only once. It had come to him, but he had spurned it, merely because it did not look very bright.

⊠⊠ The magic stone is not to be understood literally as the performer of miracles. It stands for a spiritual opportunity which may be lost on account of doubts and misgivings, the biggest enemies of progress. ⊠⊠

The Misunderstood Prayer

Too far was Badrinath, the holy place of hoary antiquity in the Himalayas. Narrow was the road—and it passed through rocks and thorny bushes. One had to climb stiff hills and at times plod through miles and miles of arid land without any hamlet on the roadside for shelter or even the shadows of a tree for rest.

But Babaji Tukandas was determined to pay a visit to the place for the *darshan* of Lord Badri Vishnu. He was neither young nor strong. And his well-wishers warned him of the possible dangers on the way from wild beasts and bandits.

"If a beast claims my body, my soul will straight reach the lotus feet of the Lord. So far as bandits are concerned, why should they waste their time on me?" replied Tukandas.

And set forth did Tukandas ignoring all suggestions against his doing so.

Inspiration, no doubt, invigorated his legs and Tukandas reached Haridwar without much difficulty. But, thereafter, he began to feel the strain in his limbs and he stopped more often than he used to. Once, while walking through a barren meadow, he was soaked in an hour-long rain and suffered from fever. But he never thought of abandoning his journey. He maintained his progress, albeit haltingly and slowly.

From time to time affluent travellers passed by him riding horses or donkeys. Tukandas looked at them wistfully and sighed. How easy would be his travel if he too had an obedient vehicle like that! He, however, would cleanse his mind of any such desire at the earliest.

A few more days passed. Pilgrims, moving in groups, took pity on him and gave him food and oil for his tired limbs and that kept his spirit up. But one day after observing a party riding donkeys and leaving him behind, he could not check himself from praying to his deity, "Let me also have a donkey, O Rama!"

He repeated his prayer several times, seated under a rock projecting over the road. He fell asleep.

He woke up with a jolt when someone shook him by the arm.

"Get up, get up, you loafer! Be of some service to us!" a man sporting a robust moustache commanded him.

Tukandas stood up and saw a large group of travellers resuming their journey probably after a brief halt. It was headed by a landlord, a village tyrant.

Suddenly two fellows lifted a young donkey which had been injured and clamped it on Tukandas' shoulders.

"Come on, carry it for a while!" the landlord's officials directed him.

Tukandas was left with no option. He gave out a long sigh and amazed at the totally unexpected way his prayer was granted—he desired to have a donkey and he had a donkey—he sighed and murmured, "You understood the reverse of what I meant, O Rama!" *(Ulta bujhli Rama!)*

⊠⊠ This rare irony illustrates the point that one has to take even such experiences in one's stride. Tukandas desired to ride a donkey, not for a donkey to ride him! But the beauty of the story lies in his reaction to the incident. His faith in his deity is not disturbed. In his compassion, he views it only as an error of judgement on his deity's part! ⊠⊠

MANOJ DAS (b. 1934), who had a picturesque career as a radical youth leader once courting jail and taking an active part in the Afro-Asian Students' Conference at Bandung, Indonesia (1956), is well-known today as one of our foremost writers, writing in his mother tongue Oriya as well as in English. His short stories are translated into several of the world's major languages and his personal columns in some of the national dailies were widely appreciated. He is also recognised as an able interpreter of India's literary and cultural heritage. He teaches at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry, while a couple of universities have conferred on him the status of Honorary Emeritus Professor.

Taking a break from his original writing, he has applied his creative talent to telling a hundred tales from the compassionate world of the mystic teachers of yore.

ISBN 81-260-1175-0

a passage into the psyche of India

- *a hundred tales of light, wit and delight–*
- *tales of common senses and sense uncommon–*
- *tales of the wise and their wiswcracks–*
- *tales that have provided the questing souls with auspicious wind to sail across the ocean of life to the ultimate horizon – through the ages.*

Retold by a master-story teller of our time –
one of the best-loved creative writers of India -
Recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, the
Padmashri and the Saraswati Samman – Manc

KR-483-934

ISBN 81-260-1175-0

SAHITYA
AKADEMI

2 088126 011757